



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

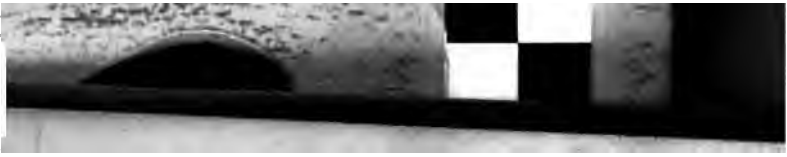
- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

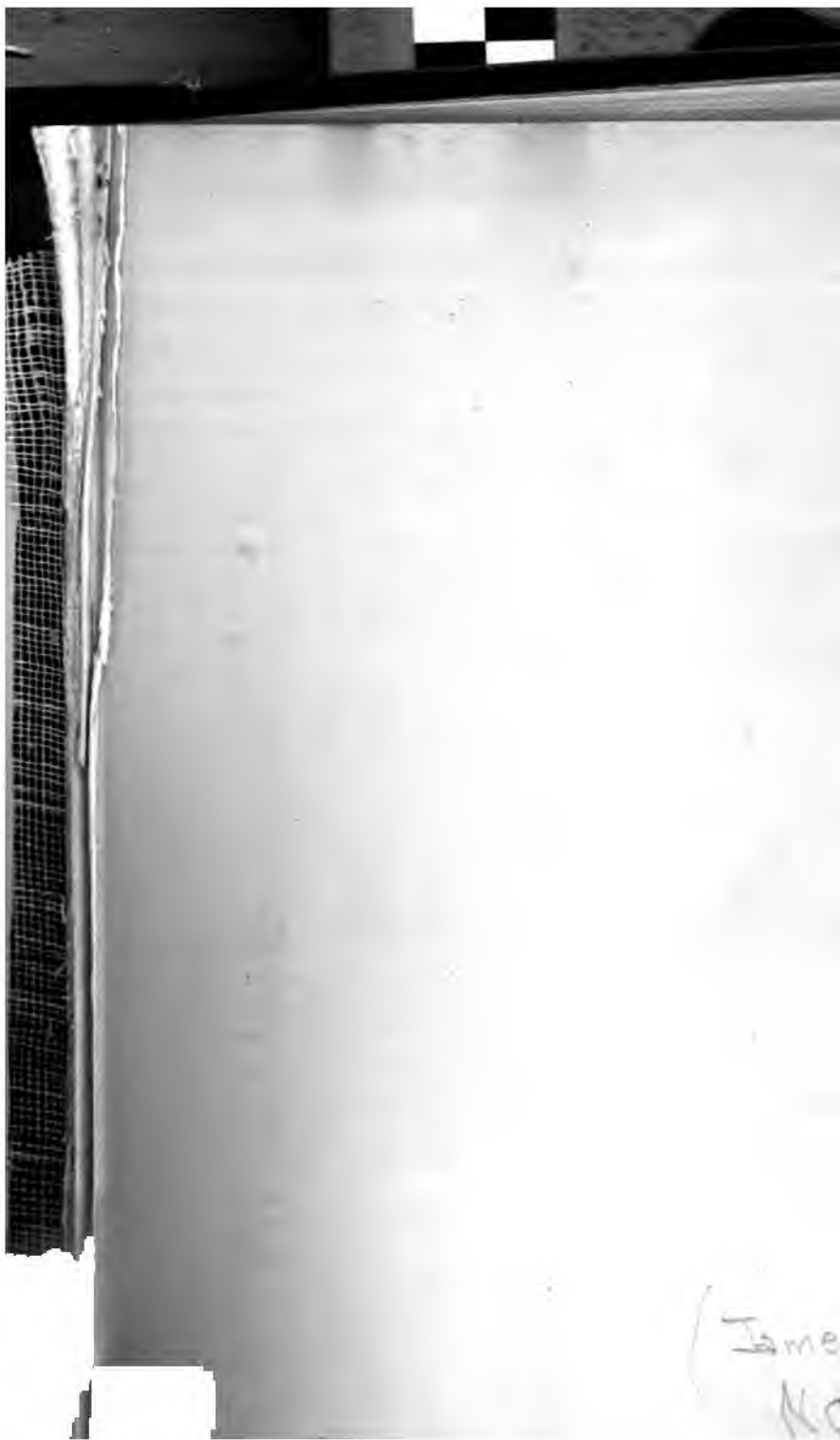
WINDOWS

y J. E. BUCKROSE



Handwritten signature or initials.

Handwritten horizontal line or signature.





CP






27



SPRAY ON THE
W I N D O W S
J. E. BUCKROSE



2
f

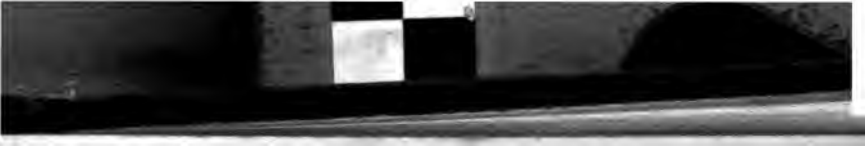


SPRAY ON TH
W I N D O W
J. E. BUCKROS



1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65
66
67
68
69
70
71
72
73
74
75
76
77
78
79
80
81
82
83
84
85
86
87
88
89
90
91
92
93
94
95
96
97
98
99
100

.



SPRAY ON THE
W I N D O W S
J. E. BUCKROSE

BY J. E. BUCKROSE

**BECAUSE OF JANE
A BACHELOR'S COMEDY
THE BROWNS
GAY MORNING**

**GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY
NEW YORK**

Not
St

SPRAY ON THE WINDOWS

BY

J. E. BUCKROSE, pseud

AUTHOR OF "BECAUSE OF JANE," "A BACHELOR'S
COMEDY," "GAY MORNING," ETC.

(Jamison, 2005, p. 10)

100
100
100

NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

M. 100



TO NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY
197568A
ASTOR, LENOX AND
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS
R 1926 L

Copyright, 1915,
By GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY



CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I THE WEDDING MARCH	9
II THE RED GRANGE	26
III DOOR-HANDLES—AND THINGS	38
IV A SEA LION	60
V WINTER	75
VI THE INEVITABLE HAPPENS	90
VII REALITY	105
VIII A STRANGE DAY	125
IX A STORM	139
X FOOTSTEPS	152
XI SISTERS	163
XII BETHROTHAL	176
XIII ADVENTURE	194
XIV SUNSHINE AND ROSES	213
XV THE TERRACE AGAIN	225
XVI EVERY DAY	242
XVII LOSING AND FINDING	256
XVIII THE CAPTAIN	276
XIX MUDDLE	293
XX THE PURPOSE EMERGING	316



SPRAY ON THE WINDOWS





SPRAY ON THE WINDOWS

CHAPTER I

THE WEDDING MARCH

ANN MIDDLETON sat in a hammock-chair before one of the little, bow-windowed houses in Sea-view Terrace. There was already, it being September, a bite in the salt air which filled her with life and energy, so it soon became annoying to sit quite still behind a large sunshade: particularly as there chanced to be no sun.

The sound of a band drifted across the wind-bitten space which called itself a public garden. Ann tapped her foot impatiently to the time of the Wedding March which was being played over and over again in the distance with such monotonous persistence.

Tum-tum-te-tum-tum-tum-tum!

It was most irritating to sit on this little square of grass, a virtual prisoner, while all Wodenscar was at the wedding; but Ann had not been invited and she wished to avoid encountering the guests.

What made the whole thing doubly annoying was the fact that she had hoped and intended to marry the bridegroom herself. But he had declined the honour. Not in so many words, but with phlegmatic plainness. And Ann, who had only come to Wodenscar from

her own and the bridegroom's town, forty miles away on the previous day, was but slightly acquainted with the bride.

The Middleton household in that rather busy inland town consisted of a father, stepmother and four sisters. Ann was the only child of Dr. Middleton's first wife, and she possessed a private income of seventy pounds a year. The practice was not a lucrative one, and the stepmother, a woman who saw life as it appears to those unconscious of atmosphere, made all the girls understand that they must get off or get out. To live with her was to have life's mists dispelled, and she observed with a stark clearness which is no more like reality than a photograph—or a painting by Corot.

But though Ann felt all this in common with her stepmother, she did not exactly perceive it; she thought, as a matter of fact, that she was rather romantic than otherwise. As a child, she had been greatly indulged by her stepmother, because that well-intentioned woman was always fearing lest the neighbours or her own conscience should accuse her of being unfair. During the first years after her marriage to Dr. Middleton there was but one preoccupation in the household—that Ann should be happy in spite of a stepmother and a growing horde of step-sisters.

Nursery governesses were chosen and retained chiefly because they had a facility for amusing children, and they read to Ann, played with her, studied her happiness in every way. So she went through her childhood, always amused and considered, and she naturally expected life to treat her in the same way.

But when she grew up, Mrs. Middleton's reputation

as a stepmother in ten thousand had become so firmly fixed that there was no need to prove it, and Ann ceased to receive preferential treatment. She was treated exactly like her stepsisters.

Then her greatest friend married a rich man while she remained at home, spending her energies on Ambulance work, Auction Bridge and embroidery, and now she first began to feel actually defrauded. This was not what her nursery days had led her to expect. The world ought to go on amusing her, pleasing her, considering her, as the nursery world had done.

She was like thousands of others, but that made her growing discontent none the less real, and it was gradually borne in upon her that, under the present conditions of life, a really suitable marriage does still afford a girl the best chance of having a good time.

So, veiling herself behind a romantic view of herself, obtained from a great deal of light fiction, she proceeded to track a fashionable clergyman with private means. Her slim figure, long, round neck, wide eyes, and curtain of dark hair shading a cheek of extraordinary innocence, made a very pleasant picture at the many daily services which she attended. The clergyman thought of young saints as he looked at her, and he dreamed at night that he saw exquisite processions of girls with round cheeks and shadowy hair—but he married a widow with a toupée and a well-invested fortune.

Ann was indignant and almost dismayed, as if, in those nursery days, she had been refused a legitimate pleasure for no reason at all. Life, she vaguely but intensely felt, was behaving abominably.

Soon after that, however, she encountered the bride-

groom of to-day. He was a nice young man with an adequate fortune, and she liked him, and he liked her. So far, so good. But about this time Ann unfortunately read in a woman's paper that any woman can marry any man in the world by means of judicious flattery. So she flattered the young man, but not judiciously, because it was no part of her nature, and she had yet to learn the art. He, therefore, began to think her insincere, then to wonder what she was "driving at"; finally, he realized she wanted to marry him. Upon that he automatically ceased to desire her, and proposed within the month to a second cousin whom he had been seriously considering since he was nineteen.

The second cousin resided in Wodenscar—called Wonscar by the inhabitants—and this was the wedding day.

Ann flushed impatiently as the pealing of church-bells clashed through the little town, for she knew that the happy pair were now whirring along the road in a brand new motor-car en route for Switzerland. Shortly afterwards she heard the scream of a railway engine, which showed that the special train provided for the guests had also departed. She emerged from ambush, went into her little front sitting-room and demanded tea.

Quite evidently *that* was all over; she cheered up and felt ready for the next best thing.

Mrs. Walker, the landlady, brought in the tea, wearing a white silk blouse tightened into her trim waist, and her scanty hair, of the sort which turns grey very late, was waved with curling-tongs.

"Sorry your tea's unpunctual, Miss Middleton," she

said breezily, "but I was busy trimming a hat and forgot the kettle. Will you try this little pot of my own home-made blackberry jelly?"

"Oh, thank you. I love blackberry jelly," said Ann.

That was all, but a human relationship had been established between the landlady and her new lodger. Ann knew that Mrs. Walker's toilette was her first preoccupation, and Mrs. Walker knew that Ann was fond of good things. So they started thus, very happily, upon a mutual tolerant comprehension of each other's weaknesses.

"Then you commence——" Mrs. Walker paused delicately, for we are nothing in Wodenscar if not delicate upon the subject of feminine employment, "you commence your"—she rather jibbed at the word, but went for it characteristically—"seccretarial duties to-morrow?"

"Yes," Ann nodded. "Mrs. Barrington's sight is failing a little. She needs some one to help her."

"She has her nephew."

"Nephew?"

And at that word Ann's pretty face so glowed that she was like a child who has just been told of a party in store.

"Yes," said the landlady. "Captain Barrington retired this spring and came to Wodenscar for good to look after Mrs. Barrington's affairs. She's worth any nephew looking after: not that I know he *does* it for that. If he didn't see after the property somebody else must."

Ann's eyes were pellucid as she listened, and her hair was a little loosened by the sea-breeze. She had,

truly, an expression of extraordinary innocence which alone marked her out from the ordinary pleasant-looking young girl. And Mrs. Walker was almost startled to hear her say, in a very practical tone—

“I suppose the old lady has made some definite settlement on him; otherwise he would never have left the army?”

“I’m sure I don’t know. I expect so. Anyway the property is all bound to come to him because she has nobody else to leave it to.”

“Ah,” said Ann, smiling and helping herself to more jelly, “what *sort* of young man is he?”

“Well——” Mrs. Walker pondered. “He is the sort I thought I should marry when I was eighteen, and read ‘Forget-me-not,’ and sat up at night to rub my arms with glycerine. That’s the *sort* he is. Not that I’m not very happy with William.”

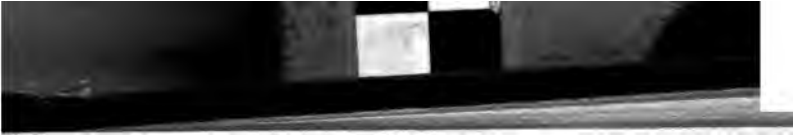
“But your husband is always away on these long voyages,” said Ann, rising from the table. “It must be very trying for you.”

“Yes.” Mrs. Walker offered a sigh upon the shrine of matrimony. Then she added briskly, gathering the tea-things together, “But there’s fors and againsts. You know nothing about marriage, as indeed is only proper—but there’s fors and againsts.”

Then she retired and Ann sat a little while looking at the sea; but with no thought of regret for the crowded medical nest from which she had been, in a way, pushed out.

A few minutes later she went down the terrace, past the little bow-windowed houses, and along the cliffs to the north.

As she walked, she drew long breaths of the keen,



THE WEDDING MARCH

15

salt air, and below the cliffs the North Sea dashed upon the shore, fine, vigorous, strong, making her feel that she was going to have a splendid life. Always she had pursued happiness, but she had never felt such a glorious certainty of it as during this evening walk.

A sea-gull flew out, screaming towards the sea, as if impelled by the force and joy of mere life. Ann breathed deep and stared after it, her soul following the flight of the bird.

Then she went down the path made by gravel donkeys on the cliff side, and walked along the hard sand where the little waves ran to meet her. It was glorious—glorious—the way she and the little waves raced each other, and laughed and danced in the keen air. Never, in all her life, had she felt so exquisitely, so tinglingly alive.

The tide was rising, but she took no account of this because the high cliffs formed of stones and clay were not perpendicular, and were so rough as to afford foothold to any able-bodied young woman.

At one moment it did occur to her that she might with advantage be caught by the waves, if only Captain Barrington were anywhere about. But she laughingly scanned a blank horizon, realizing, also, that the situation was played out. Any decent young man in these days would shy away at once from the bare idea of falling in love with a lady whom he had rescued from a watery grave. It was almost like answering an advertisement in a matrimonial newspaper.

No. Ann dismissed the thought, and walked lightly between the cliffs and the sea, meditating upon the probable extent of Captain Barrington's expectations. The North Sea glowed with an exquisite

radiance under the pale reflection of the sunset, and against it her figure stood out wonderfully, girlhood incarnate.

At last a wave touched her foot and she saw that it was time to mount the cliff, so she began to climb, holding by the stones imbedded in the dry clay.

The ascent was not improving to a white gown because she was obliged to kneel and cling and scramble, still it was all rather jolly and, as she had supposed, easy enough for a girl of her supple build. For she possessed very strong muscles hidden beneath an outline which had the impression of graceful fragility—but the little boys with whom she had played in her nursery day—*they* knew. Regrettable incidents had occurred between herself and a lumpy boy who was rather a bully, which had caused him to go home weeping; and even now his mother declared that his nose had never been quite the same thing since.

Ann had also suffered, and for some time was obliged to tie her hair back very carefully lest it should be seen that a big strand of hair had been torn out, but she did not tell any one because even her long-suffering father would have been very angry. The children of doctors in large but not very lucrative practices early learn that it is not expedient to fight and wound the most cherished member of a brood that is always 'getting something.'

But there was no sign now, as Ann breasted the cliff, to show that she had been a warrior in the past save for the fact that she made the ascent with comparatively small expenditure of breath and effort. And when she paused for a moment with her face towards the opalescent sea, the looming darkness



THE WEDDING MARCH

17

the cliff behind her, it would have seemed as impossible to imagine her engaging in a 'scrap' with a fat boy, as to have imagined the blessed St. Agatha in Wodenscar Church window belabouring the Apostle near her with a spare halo.

Ann felt pleased as she stood there, every muscle exercised, her whole body aglow. The annoyance of the afternoon gave way to a deep self-congratulation. She was profoundly glad that she had not married the bridegroom who was now speeding across the country in the new motor-car. In fact, she regarded the failure of her previous matrimonial efforts as being due to the special intervention of an overruling Providence, for she had been carefully brought up and knew that Providence looked after those who looked after themselves. Her stepmother had constantly, though not perhaps in words, repeated to her that article of faith.

She sighed with satisfaction as she turned once more to face the cliff. Well—she had always known, deep down, that she was in for something splendid.

Filled with the intoxication of this belief she made a gallant step forward, but gave a laughing 'Oh!' as her foot sank through the hard crust of the cliff into something yielding beneath—another step, and she was up to her ankles, though still only concerned with the fun of it all. Then, suddenly, she found that she could not lift her feet. The sensation was horrible. She struggled, and felt the miry clay closing round her ankles. She started to breathe pantingly, like a bird in a trap.

She sank another inch or two, and began to choke

with horror, her wide eyes starting; a terrible gull went screaming overhead.

She did not know why, but the gull seemed to her most terrible—she flung out her arms, the clay now almost reaching to her arm-pits.

Then, gradually, she realized that she was safe. The hard crust beyond the mud-hole was strong enough to support her so long as she kept her arms outstretched. She began to remember that she had heard of these holes in the cliffs near Wodenscar. A story of a servant-maid thus trapped which she had heard when a child came back to her mind.

It was, after all, only a matter of waiting until some one came along the cliff top to whom she could cry out.

Her heart resumed its normal beat and she ceased to be afraid, even though the tide was slowly mounting towards the place where she stood. There was no doubt whatever that some visitor would soon be walking along the cliff top on a fine evening in September.

The reflection of the sunset had now faded, and the lamp from the lighthouse shone out across the sea like a changeful star. The sight somehow heartened Ann, bringing the idea of safety. Without knowing it, she sensed the miraculous glamour which has surrounded always on sea or land, the following of a star.

It grew darker. The waves took on that cruel look which they wear on a moonless night, like monsters, showing their teeth, hungry for their prey, advancing and receding in a dreadful grim sportiveness.

But still Ann was not afraid. She was possessed

of great physical courage, and she knew that some one must soon come along the cliff path.

Then she heard a sound which made her suddenly feel sick with terror.

It was only the sound of fireworks going up from the Parade at Wodenscar into the still air, but it told her that the visitors would all be there, taking part in the last gala night of the season.

She was now face to face with the possibility that not a single soul would come along the cliff until the morning.

The old custom of the coastguards walking round the shores had been suspended. It was quite possible that she might remain here, fixed in a trap, while death crawled up to her by inches.

Already a first salt spray stung her cheek, and its coldness shuddered through her veins as if she had been touched by the finger of death.

She screamed, and the gulls flew out to sea, circling with dirge-like cries above the dark water.

If only she could move! She felt she could face death as well as another if she could only move. But the sense of being caught in a trap began again to suffocate her. She tried to cry out amid the clamour of the gulls, but her voice went back into her throat.

Then a gust of sharp spray dashed across her eyes, and she felt that death was here.

At that she became calmer. The water receded again, and she heard a faint sound of shouting from the people on the distant Parade.

So this was the end. She had wanted so tremendously to be happy, and this was the end.

For a fleeting second, staring with fixed eyes at the lighthouse star, she saw the faint leading of the star—the something beyond happiness.

But the next second it was gone. She strove, with one last, immense effort, to face death decently.

And it must have been through a sort of swoon that she at last heard a man shouting. She tried to cry out, and the words came hoarsely: "Help! Help!"

"I'm coming. Hold on till I come."

A smallish fair man bent over towards her from the hard part of the cliff, and when she saw him the revulsion of feeling was terrible. So she was to die after all. No one of that physique could possibly possess sufficient strength to release her in face of the blinding spray which was beginning to envelop them both.

She shut her eyes, summoning a last desperate courage. If she were going to die, she would die decently

"Go!" she panted. "We shall both be drowned."

There was no answer, but it suddenly seemed as if she were caught under the arm-pits from above in an iron vice; the very flesh felt to be drawn from her bones as she was lifted out of the mud-hole. She heard the man breathe heavily; a wave dashed up, blinding them both. She could hear amidst it all the labouring thud of his heart as he dragged her upwards in his arms. He paused, and with a last stupendous effort threw her upon the cliff top. He fell with her, and for a moment they lay there together, neither man nor woman, but two huddled creatures just escaped from the terrible powers of Nature.

After a while the man got up.

"Come," he said; "you are safe now."

She tried to rise, but her legs were numb and her clothes coated with the slimy mud. She found it impossible, and sank back upon the ground.

"Oh!" she said, covering her face. "If you hadn't come—what made you come?"

"Mrs. Walker sent me," he answered in a practical, even tone. "She missed you and began to get anxious, because she had forgotten to warn you that the cliffs were unsafe. The Urban District Council did put a board up, but it has been blown down."

Ann listened to him, and it was like being brought into a dull, safe, lamp-lighted room out of a place of terror.

"Don't you know I was within an ace of being drowned?" she said. Then she began to cry hysterically. "Oh, I don't know how to thank you. You don't know how awful that is—being imprisoned. That's the—the horror—not being able to get away."

His glance, which had been blankly indifferent, became focussed as she spoke. There was an intentness in it—a sort of suspicion—which seemed to bear no relation to what she was saying. But he made no further remark as he helped her to find a resting-place for her back against a wooden fence which ran down to the cliff edge. Then he took off his rather shabby coat, put it round her shoulders, and at last said, with no change in his odd, impersonal manner—

"You can't possibly walk. Will you wait here until I go to the next farm? I shall not be more than half-an-hour."

"Oh, thank you. I don't know how to thank you."

But before the end of her speech he was away in

the darkness, and she leaned back against the rough wood, utterly spent, but so glad to be alive that it seemed the most delightful resting-place she had ever known.

As she waited there, with the sea booming down below, she experienced the strange, exquisite joy which comes to courageous people who have touched death and escaped unharmed—she had played the great game of tag which makes the thrilling fun of all adventure.

Shivering, caked with mire so that she could not walk, Ann yet felt elated as she leaned back against the fence and heard the steady beat of footsteps receding into the distance.

They were the steps of a strong runner who ran lightly and with ease; so much Ann realized before she fell into a half-stupor of exhaustion, which lasted until her rescuer returned, trundling a wheelbarrow.

"Oh, you're back again," she said, looking up at him in a dazed fashion.

"Yes. Sorry I can do nothing better than this, but the farmer is out with horse and cart, and in any case no vehicle could be driven along the cliff top. I must ask you to get into the wheelbarrow, and I will wheel you home. I'm afraid you will be very uncomfortable."

"Oh, not at all," said Ann, trying to emulate his manner of impersonal, detached politeness. But she found it difficult to move, and with a brief "Excuse me," he lifted her into the wheelbarrow.

"My name's Finlay," he said, taking up the handle of the wheelbarrow.

"Mine is Middleton," said Ann, watching her



muddy feet as they dangled at an acute angle before the eyes of her preserver.

For the next half-hour no further word was spoken, but in spite of her discomfort and fatigue Ann felt an insane desire to giggle. Traces of the farmyard still clung about the wheelbarrow, and for the future this odour would always bring back to her that solemn trundle home, with her dreadful boots dangling, and Finlay's light shirt-sleeves and waistcoat always before her.

As they neared Sea-view Terrace Ann roused herself to make a remark, but she could only bring forth a feeble—

“I do hope you won't take cold. I can't thank you. I don't know how to——”

They jolted over a rut, but when they were on even ground once more he spoke, and his voice was different—kind and very grave.

“You need not thank me. I am glad to have saved a life. More”—he paused—“more glad than you can ever know.” Then he went on quickly, “Look, there's your landlady at the gate.”

At that moment Mrs. Walker sighted them, to run out with screams and exclamations of astonishment.

“Oh! Is she hurt? What's happened? Has she broken anything?”

“Miss Middleton has been caught by one of those mud-holes on the cliff. She is only stiff and tired. May I carry her inside?”

“Not into the parlour—into the bathroom,” shrilled Mrs. Walker, following him into the house and up the stairs.

“Good-bye,” said Ann, holding out her hand. “I can never, never——”

But he ran down the stairs without waiting to hear the finish, and Mrs. Walker and her lodger found themselves alone in the bathroom.

The hot water soon removed all immediate traces of the accident, and half-an-hour later Ann sat up in bed, eating bread and milk, and excitedly inclined for conversation. Her mind, as was only decent, reverted at once to the man who had saved her life.

“I can’t understand how Mr. Finlay managed it,” she said. “He is only a small, slight man, but he must have immense strength of muscle.”

Mrs. Walker grew suddenly solemn and nodded bodingly.

“Yes, that’s just it,” she said. “So much the worse for him, poor fellow.”

“Why?”

“Well, he knocked a man down and killed him.”

“Killed him!” Ann’s eyes peered out, very bright and startled.

“And got put into prison for manslaughter.”

“How horrible to kill a man! No wonder he was glad to save a life,” said Ann, shivering a little.

Mrs. Walker took the milk-bowl.

“It’s to be hoped,” she said, “that Mrs. Barrington won’t hear about Mr. Finlay bringing you home, all covered with mud, in a wheelbarrow. She wouldn’t like it. Not at all, she wouldn’t.”

“Is she particular?” murmured Ann, suddenly beginning to feel very drowsy.

“She’s like everybody else,” said Mrs. Walker—
“particular about things she is particular about and

loose where you wouldn't expect. Only you can understand that a lady who won't eat mutton because a sheep——”

But Ann was already half asleep, and as soon as Mrs. Walker had crept out, milk-bowl in hand, she fell into a deep slumber which lasted until early morning. Then she awakened, trembling, from a terrible dream. She had thought herself once more in the mud-hole on the cliff side, and she could again hear the steady beat of Finlay's footsteps, but he could not advance. She had to listen, with death creeping up to her, while he marked time in the meshes of some terrible trap from which there was no escape.

But it was broad daylight now, and Mrs. Walker came in with a huge black cat under her arm.

“I was up early, so I thought I'd bring you a cup of tea,” she said. “And here's my Gertie to keep you company. She always sits at the table and has her meals with me, does my Gertie.”

“How does Mr. Walker like that?” smiled Ann over her tea.

“Him? Oh, he's supposed to be dead such times!” said Mrs. Walker breezily. Then she went away, having dispelled the shadows cast by that unpleasant dream.

Ann finished her tea and then went to the window, whence she could see the waves sparkling beneath a perfect sunrise. The whole occurrence of the night before seemed now like a bad dream, and the reality was this glorious morning with all sorts of fine possibilities opening out before her.

She stood at her window, bright-eyed, radiant, eager to start again on the quest for happiness.

CHAPTER II

THE RED GRANGE

ABOUT half-past three in the afternoon, Ann passed through the gateway of the Red Grange, and saw the old brick house in the midst of the box-edged Dutch gardens. In spite of the splendour of the autumn scene—blue sky—red and yellow of the leaves—and brilliance of herbaceous borders—there was yet something remote and a little sinister about the appearance of the place. Perhaps this was accounted for by the ancient yews which guarded the house, black against all this riot of colour.

Ann had often seen the Grange before, because Dr. Middleton always sent his family to Wodenscar to recuperate from those ailments which attack even the best regulated nursery. But she had not been inside the garden during these visits, for the simple reason that old Mr. Courtenay, Mrs. Barrington's great uncle, did not permit any one to pass the lodge gates without special permission. He had died five years previous to this time, at the age of ninety, and in the odour of sanctity which always surrounds gentlemen at that period of life when they have continued to subscribe liberally to everything.

But underneath or through that odour crept, from the older parts of Wodenscar, a sort of fragrance which was—aromatic—and preserved the memory of him very much alive.

Ann thought of the wild tales she had heard about the splendid old man who consorted with smugglers and fought with them, and lived a life in that remote spot, far from the pressure of public opinion, which seemed incredible now that Wodenscar was no longer a bleak fishing village on the Yorkshire coast, but a smug little third-rate watering-place.

All the same, Ann remembered what a nurse had told her long ago, and she glanced aside as she went along, half expecting to see that handsome, reckless old face grinning at her out of the blackness of the yews. Many a village girl had seen it thus, as Ann knew, and there was already a legend in Wodenscar that it could be so seen at this day, for romance dies hard in quiet places. People there have time to experience exquisite thrills at tales that may be true, and are never quite told.

Perhaps the atmosphere of the house had influenced its present owner, Mrs. Barrington; anyway, Ann felt this sense of something beyond what was seen to be intensified as she followed a servant through the dark, wood-panelled hall. It was as if those walls had absorbed something from the lives which had been passed there, and were more, in a sense, full, than the walls of a new house. No one can fail to have noticed this difference between the blank negation of new walls and the suggestiveness of old ones, though they may not have put their instinctive feeling into thought.

Ann, impatient of this, called it 'stuffiness,' though the hall was full of fresh air and light enough. And there was a very slight oppression on her spirits as she advanced to meet her employer.

Mrs. Barrington greeted her, rising and coming

cordially forward. She was a short, immensely stout woman in a dark green brocade gown. Her large-featured face was full of good nature, but beneath that good nature was the obstinacy which almost inevitably grows upon rich elderly women who are never thwarted.

“I’m glad to see you again, my dear,” she said, referring to their one previous interview at the Station Hotel in Trentford. “I hope we shall be very happy together. Arthur, this is Miss Middleton.”

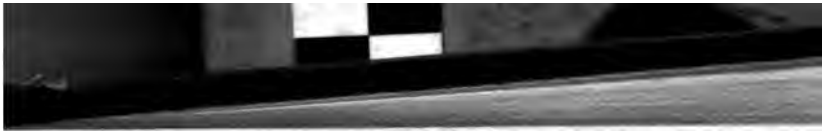
Captain Barrington rose from the shadow of a large settle by the fire and came forward.

“You have quite a walk from Wodenscar—but it is a lovely afternoon,” he said pleasantly.

Ann at once decided that he would do: there was, at any rate, nothing sly or underhand about Ann, even in her dealings with herself, and she did not beat about the bush. She determined immediately to fall in love with Captain Barrington. Only she had learned something from the disastrous past, and avoided the mistake of allowing him to know that she had so decided.

But as she walked across the room with her light step and virginal air, she thought how extremely easy it would be. Six feet of well-set-up manhood, an agreeable voice, and the reversion of Mrs. Barrington’s estates.

It is a truism, of course, that fortune favours, in the end, those who pursue her long enough and single-heartedly enough. And the time, really, had come for Ann’s luck in matrimonial affairs to take a turn. So no wonder that Captain Barrington was pleasantly



attracted by the innocent curve of her cheek as he handed her the bread and butter.

He had but recently returned from India and a somewhat sultry flirtation with the wife of a Collector; the cool virginity of Ann, therefore, made a special appeal to his imagination. At the same time he was quite sufficiently experienced to detach an irregular nose from the general effect, and he said to himself that she would be nothing when she grew old.

In the meantime the conversation rather languished, and finally Captain Barrington said, taking a second piece of cake—

“Sea-view Terrace—let’s see—Finlay lodges there, doesn’t he?”

“Yes,” said Ann.

“Miss Middleton is not likely to come across him,” said Mrs. Barrington a little severely.

“No, poor chap. He avoids everybody. I’ve tried to make up to him, but he shuts up like an oyster,” said Barrington.

“It would be very unnatural if he did go about like other people,” said Mrs. Barrington. Then to Ann, “I suppose you know?”

“Yes. How dreadful!” said Ann.

“I don’t blame him at all,” said Barrington, rising from his seat. “Poor chap, he had excellent prospects at the bar, and on the very day when he had won his first case he came across a drunken man kicking a woman. She—well, she was in delicate health—and Finlay went for the brute. So should I have done—I hope. But they sent Finlay to prison, and his career was dishd, of course. The most his rela-

tives could do for him was to get him this berth at the brick-factory. His father is a great contractor or something in Manchester, and had an interest in the concern."

"Why doesn't he emigrate?" said Ann. "Surely he could do that."

"He stays because of his mother. The whole thing nearly broke her heart, but she can't bear for him to go out of the country. Oh, it's cursed luck! Makes you mad to think of such waste."

"It looks," said Ann, "as if he could never be happy—never."

She thought for a moment of this man who had so utterly failed in the quest she was set upon, and then turned brightly to Mrs. Barrington. "As you do not wish me to start work until to-morrow, I think I had better be going."

"No. No. Stay and have a chat. I shall be all alone."

"Yes." Barrington spoke from the door. "I must be off now. Good-bye."

He whistled to his dog and went out, and the ladies were left in the gathering twilight of late September afternoon. The room was not large, and had been the favourite living place of the old man who, in some odd way, still seemed to dominate the place. Mrs. Barrington sat by the small fire, turning back her brocade gown and wearing all the airs of a mistress, but she still seemed to be somehow a visitor. The sprawling pattern of her brocade gown gleamed oddly as the firelight flickered about it, and her large-featured face was in shadow.

"Perhaps," she said, glancing behind her to see that



the door was shut, "perhaps you wonder why I chose to-day at four o'clock for your first coming to me?"

"N-no. I thought it suited you," said Ann, a little surprised by the solemn intensity of Mrs. Barrington's tone.

"It did. But there were other reasons. It was the propitious moment."

"Oh, yes," said Ann.

So vaguely, however, that Mrs. Barrington thought well to explain at great length, as the shadows in the old room grew deeper, what were the views and beliefs which had brought her to this. Or, at least, she endeavoured to put into words the way in which the great wave of awakened interest in the supernatural had first taken her loose-thinking but very intelligent mind in its course. But as she possessed no concentration and had strayed from one immense subject to another—each worthy the study of a lifetime—the natural result was chaos.

"Thus," she concluded, "having found the propitious day and hour, I hope and believe that the connection will be a happy one for both of us."

The mixture of homely, honest good nature with the confused residue of those studies which Mrs. Barrington had skimmed and left behind, created an intellectual fog in which Ann felt herself to be losing her way.

"Thank you," she said boldly, "I will do my best."

"I suppose"—Mrs. Barrington leaned forward, speaking in a deep voice, and the absolute sincerity of her manner carried conviction—"I suppose you think we are alone?"

Ann jumped. The firelight was dying down now,

and the little, old room seemed to grow darker every moment; involuntarily she glanced into the shadowy corners before common sense came to her aid and forced her to blurt out—

“Alone! Of course, we are alone.”

“At this moment,” said Mrs. Barrington solemnly, peering at Ann through the gloom, “there are two figures behind my chair, looking over my shoulders. One is dark; the other fair. One is influencing me for evil. The other for good.”

Ann half rose, then she remembered Captain Barrington and sat down again.

“Oh, indeed!” she said. “How—how peculiar!”

“It is not peculiar. It is perfectly natural.” Mrs. Barrington paused, then continued in an ordinary tone, “Do you notice anything strange about this room? Anything unholy?”

Ann shook her head, taking refuge in silence.

“No? But if you had been here when I first came you would have felt terrible thoughts crowding about the old walls. I have learned how to exorcize them, and I am at peace.”

Mrs. Barrington rose, and the absolute, solid reality of this big, fat woman gave a reality to her words which Ann could not disregard; she could only fight against the onrush of that strange wave which had at last reached her, as it reaches so many thinking people, startling, giving them pause, whether they regard it as a danger and fly it, or as the fringe of the sea of knowledge and wade deeper in.

The room was almost dark as Mrs. Barrington held out her hand.

“Good-bye,” she said. “I shall not try to make

you adopt my views, but I thought it better you should know the principles upon which this household is governed. I have just lost a valuable gardener because he objected to them. He had arranged to plant some rose-trees on a Wednesday, and I found that the conjunction of the planets was not propitious for such an undertaking until the following Monday—and so he left. He said he did not like the planets interfering, and he sneered in a dry Scotch way which was very unpleasant. So I thought it best for all parties to make things clear to you at once.”

“Of course. Every one has a right to their own views. It is very kind of you. Good-bye.”

Rather breathless, Ann found herself outside in the fresh air, with a queer, light-headed sensation as if she had been up in a balloon or down in a coal-mine, or, anyway, in some place quite off the normal level. The mixture of suggestive thought and puerile application made an atmosphere in which, for the moment, she found it difficult to see anything clearly.

But as she walked down the drive between the flowers in the scented quiet of the September evening, she began to take the view of life to which she had always been accustomed. Mrs. Barrington no longer loomed grotesque, the priestess of secrets guessed at since the dim beginning of things; she was simply a fat, kind, elderly lady with a large fortune and a nephew.

Ann began to feel very tired as she walked home, and her eyes were shadowed underneath by the fatigues of the previous evening; but she came across Captain Barrington again on her way through the village—a thing which was no particular coincidence,

because everybody in Wodenscar met every one else at least once a day—and she was not too tired to respond gaily enough to his greeting.

“I hoped to see you,” he remarked at once. “I know my aunt has been talking to you, and I don’t want you to take what she says to heart. She has learned a little about many great things—each of them enough to occupy a lifetime of study—and she mixes them together. Don’t question her about such subjects. Just listen and say nothing. You don’t know where it will end if you begin to appear interested.”

“But she may expect——” Ann paused on that, her face upturned, and Barrington smiled indulgently down at this pleasant little girl with the charmingly natural manner.

“She only expects you to read to her, and copy out her horoscopes, and write her letters; she can do the intelligence department—she would really prefer, in the long run, an efficient nonentity. Do you think you can transform yourself into a nonentity?”

He laughed, and she with him. Then he went on, “I say, all this hasn’t made you think of chucking up the job, has it?”

“Of course not,” said Ann.

“I’m glad of that.” He hesitated a moment, then added frankly, “I’m bound to take a great interest in this matter of a secretary. You can see for yourself the untold harm that might be done if she got hold of some charlatan who would impose on her.”

“Mrs. Barrington does not strike me as being a likely woman to be easily imposed upon; she’s immensely shrewd, under it all,” said Ann.



Barrington laughed again, glancing at her this time with deepened interest.

“The Yorkshire shrewdness—we’ve all got it,” he said; “but it leaves us terribly open to attack. We’re so superstitious—and so sure of ourselves.” He paused, then held out his hand. “Well, I’m glad you intend to stop. My aunt is a good woman and a most kind one, in spite of having browsed too much upon ideas which are too strong for her to digest. Come to me if you are bothered in any way.”

“I’m sure Mrs. Barrington is very kind. I’m sure I shall like her, if she will only like me,” responded Ann fervently.

Then they parted, and as Ann entered the terrace she saw the neighbours gossiping over their railings in the twilight. The little gardens were filled with flowers, which seemed to bloom out with incredible colour and bravery in all this sun and wind so near the sea; they were never large, but very sweet and clear, and they seemed to smell of sea-breezes as well as of mignonette, or wallflowers in spring, or lavender.

The season was over, and ‘visitors’—it is not etiquette in Wodenscar to speak of lodgers—had nearly all departed; for the people who frequent this unfashionable watering-place are mostly those who have families of young children returning to school in the middle of September. So the householders in the terrace now emerged from a seclusion which had lasted since July, and drew together, talking pleasantly of the boisterous family who had taken number six, and of the charming young people who had ‘stayed’ at

number nine, and had turned out to be no young couple at all, in the sense indicated by the terrace.

Friendly 'Good-nights' greeted Ann as she went along between the gardens and the wind-bitten common, but underneath all the light talk was that eternal boom of the sea which formed an accompaniment, unnoticed, to everything said and done in Wodenscar. All these little lives were, in a sense, set to tremendous music. And when the people of Wodenscar looked out of their windows they saw things through a salt haze which for ever dimmed the bright panes, in spite of constant polishing.

The boom of the sea—the clean, salt haze on the windows—that, somehow, is Wodenscar.

Ann called back clear 'Good-nights,' and then suddenly paused by the garden where an elderly Miss Linskill stood watering flowers, for she saw Finlay in front of her, and wished to avoid meeting him. It would never do to allow the experience of the night before to drag her into a damaging friendship with a man of whom Mrs. Barrington disapproved. Ann was grateful, but she often performed mean little actions of this sort, because she was so much afraid of doing anything which might jeopardize her chance of happiness.

But she need not have feared this time, for Finlay appeared to be at least as anxious to escape her as she could be to avoid him. He walked straight up to his door, looking neither to the right nor the left, though he must have been conscious of Ann's presence at the gate of the next garden but one.

She waited until the door closed and then walked on, not in the least ashamed of herself, for the nursery

theory of her early childhood stood her in good stead now. She had constantly heard in those days that a child should not be forced to talk or be pleasant to people unless inclined, as such a course tends to hypocrisy. It is difficult to follow out this principle later in life, but the power to do so is a distinct asset.

Ann, therefore, went into her own house with no shadow on her conscience, but she was a little startled when Mrs. Walker burst upon her from the kitchen with an agitated "Well? Was it all right?"

"Was what all right?"

"Your aurora. The last young lady Mrs. Barrington got to try had a green one, and it ought to have been pink. At least, I think those were the colours, but I'm not sure. Anyway, the poor young person came back crying and said she wouldn't do."

"Well, I'm not crying, you see," said Ann, sitting down wearily. "Oh, dear, I am tired."

"You'd have been worse than tired to-night if it hadn't been for Mr. Finlay," said Mrs. Walker, drawing herself in at the waist to accentuate the—as Mr. Walker phrased it—extreme 'jimminess' of her figure.

Ann looked across the little room, listening to the boom of the sea outside.

"I should have been dead," she answered in a low tone. "Dead."

"Don't think about it any more," said Mrs. Walker.

"No," said Ann, rousing herself. "No, I won't think about it. I'm alive."

"That's all you want when you're young."

"Um—you never say, that when you're young," said Ann.

CHAPTER III

DOOR-HANDLES—AND THINGS

A WIND got up in the night, and the waves ran so high that by morning every window in the terrace was delicately patterned with sea spray. Ann awoke very early and looked out at that sparkle of bluish-grey and old silver which is the colour of pleasant weather at Wodenscar.

She dressed, planning a walk before the world was up, and cautiously turned the handle of her bedroom door—or rather, she tried to do so.

The handle was of black pottery, and like thousands to be seen in the little houses of England, but it had developed—as seemed rather the habit of things—a character from living with Mrs. Walker. It had, in fact, gained the artistic temperament, and now declined to turn excepting when so disposed.

Mrs. Walker had forgotten to tell Ann of this peculiarity, and that it needed humouring, so she pulled and pushed, rattled and shook amid a murmuring fire of such expletives as may be used by those who object to the crudeness of plain condemnation. But it was no good. For determination, however determined, is simply a useless irritant when brought into conflict with the artistic temperament. Thus a mere door-handle, possessing it, can by sheer unreasoning obstinacy quite easily withstand a thinking human being with an immortal soul.

“Wait!” shouted Mrs. Walker. “You’ll only make it worse. It wants humouring.”

She proceeded to humour it from the other side of the door, but upon the door-handle had settled down the bitter, dour obstinacy of the artistic temperament roughly handled. It refused to come round. This was not one of its mornings for turning, and it declined to turn.

Then Mrs. Walker became annoyed—angry—violent. She flung herself upon that obstinate lump of black pottery and employed warm terms culled from the nautical vocabulary of Mr. Walker. But so far as the door-handle was concerned, she might have mentioned icebergs at the North Pole.

Mrs. Walker drew back a moment, gathering her energies. The annoyance of having been betrayed into expressions suited to a tramp steamer, but not to the ears of a ‘visitor’ who was to be kept in her place, added to the galling indifference of the door-handle, finished Mrs. Walker off. She went for it once more with a vim and energy that would have marked her out, in other circles, as a new White Hope, and fell back upon the landing with a piece of black pottery cutting deep into her hand. The rest of the door-handle remained immovable as ever.

Now, as Mrs. Walker lay on her back, panting, with the blood streaming from her hand, she knew, though she did not know she knew, why men have always stoned the prophets.

It is because they possess, though in a high and beautiful and magnificent degree, the properties of that door-handle.

But Mrs. Walker was only conscious of thinking,

a little hazily, that a great deal of blood spurted from her hand—and that the world was going black though the sun had but lately risen.

She shut her eyes on that idea and failed to respond when Ann called out, from the other side of the door—

“Mrs. Walker! Mrs. Walker! Have you fallen? Are you hurt?”

Mrs. Walker opened one eye, faintly, upon the remains of the door-handle.

“Bleeding like a pig,” she answered, only just loud enough for Ann to hear. “Oh, my new green felt!”

Then came another silence while Ann peered anxiously through the keyhole and saw one foot sticking out in a curious, inanimate way.

“Mrs. Walker!” she called again.

Still that queer silence which seems at once to fill any place in which one is left alone with an insensible person.

Ann tried the door again, then rushed to the window and looked out. Not a soul in sight. The empty road, the shining sea, the little breezy gardens; nothing alive but a gull screaming over the houses.

She leaned far over the window-sill, craning out and peering sideways, but she could see only a line of shrouded, gleaming windows.

She shouted aloud, and the gull screamed raucously back at her out of the emptiness; with a voice that held, as it were, the sound of a thumb to a nose, so crudely mocking was it.

That mockery fired Ann. A second time a prisoner, and the gulls screaming at her out of their freedom while that poor woman bled to death.

She shouted shrilly, “I’ll do it!” at the circling

gull, and clambered out over the narrow window-sill. She clung, poised precariously, on the top of the narrow porch of the little front door, then crept across it to the next, saw that the window in the adjoining house which corresponded to her own was open, managed, she never knew how, to fling it wide, and sprang into the room.

Without looking towards the bed, which she divined on the right, she tossed a hasty "Excuse me!" towards a possible occupant and dashed down the stairs to the hall door, which was still fastened. As she fumbled with the lock she was dimly conscious of a perturbed person in pyjamas behind her on the stairs, but she could not wait to consider that, any more than she had been able to pause and parley with the probably reluctant owner of that bedroom before using it as a passage to reach Mrs. Walker's landing, her one thought being that every second was of value, and that Mrs. Walker might bleed to death.

She ran into her own front door and up the stairs like a flash, and had bound the hand on principles learned at an ambulance class, restored the patient to consciousness, and administered sal volatile, before she began to consider what the people in the next house might be thinking of her.

Then she heard a man's footstep, and Finlay calling softly up the stairs—

"Mrs. Walker! Hush! I want a word with you. Immediately. Most important!"

Mrs. Walker's curiosity got the better of her indisposition, and she peered down over the banisters, while he stood, in overcoat and pyjamas, gazing anxiously up at her.

"Well, what is it?" she said.

"Hush! Is that young lady in the house?"

"Yes."

"Then—— Come down lower, Mrs. Walker—then you must take care of her."

"I do."

"Lock her up, I mean, until a doctor comes. Don't be alarmed, but I'm afraid——" He caught sight of her hand. "Surely—to goodness—she hasn't done that!"

"Nonsense——"

"It's evident," interrupted Finlay urgently, "that the poor girl suffered more from the shock of that experience on the cliff than we realized. She must have climbed out of her window and into mine in a way that no sane girl——"

"Stop!" said Mrs. Walker. Then she turned, if feebly, upon Ann, who stood behind her. "You never mean to tell me that you did such a thing as that?"

"There was no other way. I couldn't think of any other. I'm awfully sorry," said Ann, also peering down at Finlay. "I couldn't leave Mrs. Walker there to bleed to death."

"I'd cut my hand badly with a door-knob," said Mrs. Walker, "and I'm grateful, of course. But I do think Miss Middleton ought at least to have knocked at your window."

"Oh, it's nothing. I beg your pardon. I didn't understand," said Finlay, as he hastily retreated.

"Mr. Finlay!" called Ann.

He stopped reluctantly in the full light of the open door, a smallish, rough-haired man, who looked smaller than he was at that moment, because of his



DOOR-HANDLES—AND THINGS 43

endeavours to make an overcoat of moderate length cover a pair of bare ankles, disclosed pathetically by the imperfections of his laundress.

"I want," said Ann, very fresh and neat in the sunlight, "I just want to explain."

"Oh, I quite understand—very plucky of you. Please say no more."

"I'm awfully sorry," urged Ann anxiously. "I know how unpleasant it must have been for you. I promise faithfully never to do it again."

The something in Ann, really virginal, matching her looks, had all its own way then. And Finlay responded to it with a gravity of courtesy that was very pleasant to see, in spite of the badly washed pyjamas.

"I feel honoured that you should have used my room for such a purpose," he said.

"But I never realized it was yours—or whose it was."

"No, of course not." He smiled at her, and an expression of wistful fun crossed his face, making him look almost boyish.

"Well," said Ann, holding out her hand. "It's tremendously good of you to take it that way. Most people would be fearfully annoyed. I know I should."

He touched her hand lightly and let it fall, his expression again detached and uninterested as ever.

"Oh, please don't think of the matter again. I'm just off to bathe now. Good-morning."

He went, then, padding down to the sea in his bare feet; and though a man's feet are seldom beautiful to look at, Ann could not help noticing that Mr. Finlay's were beautiful. Strong, fine, and exquisitely

proportioned, they seemed capable of conveying him at that even speed for any distance.

She watched until he had run down the path at the end of the terrace and disappeared over the cliff-edge.

What a life! she thought. Just getting through the days and the chances of each one spoiled before it rose.

Then she dismissed him from her mind, and went indoors.

It is no exaggeration to say that she really had forgotten his existence as she sat at breakfast with the sun streaming through the east side of the low window upon the six bouquets of paper flowers which adorned the room. These decorations were Mrs. Walker's especial fancy, and she showed so much hurt annoyance when any visitor wished to have them removed that they usually remained. There were yellow daffodils, pink roses, red carnations, like and yet hideously unlike, resembling flowers which had been grown by gas-light and fed on dust instead of morning dew.

All the same, they made a fine colour in the little room, and Ann sat in the midst of it like a virgin at a festival. Mrs. Walker noticed this when she came in, though her usual sprightliness remained rather muffled by her late accident: and her, "I'm really surprised *you* could have done such a thing," was the outcome of its effect on her.

"You know how it all happened," repeated Ann.

"Yes," said Mrs. Walker. "Excuse me if I sit down. Yes. But a young lady that two such things *can* happen to, in less than a week, has got to be extra careful of the way she goes on. You can see that

for yourself. Anyway——” She made an ineffectual attempt to adjust her waist after the old trim fashion with one hand——“anyway, my nerves won’t stand it. I’m deeply grateful for kind assistance. But it’s more than my nerves can stand.”

“Nothing more can happen now. But I’ll be very careful. I will indeed,” said Ann.

“Well, you can’t say fairer than that,” responded Mrs. Walker cordially. “I shouldn’t be so particular if I weren’t, what you may call, a grass widow. I s’pose that’s why they’re called grass widows, because they’ve got to behave like vegetables, and even *then* they get talked about.”

“It’s no use taking too much notice of gossip,” said Ann, with intent to soothe.

“Depends where you live,” said Mrs. Walker. “If you live in a little place you must take notice of gossip because gossip takes such a lot of notice of you. Now, there’s yourself, for instance, you don’t suppose Mrs. Barrington won’t know all about this before she lays her head on her pillow to-night.”

“Oh, no!” said Ann quickly.

“You wait and see,” said Mrs. Walker.

As a matter of fact, however, it was not Mrs. Barrington, but her nephew, who heard the gossip which permeated the village before nightfall. In this way Wodenscar, fresh and salt, bears an exact resemblance to a stifling Indian bazaar; for one hour nobody knows a report, and the next hour everybody knows it—and yet none can tell how the tale is carried.

Fortunately for Ann, Mrs. Barrington strongly discouraged gossip of any sort from her household, and

in addition she was at the moment deeply immersed in casting the horoscope of a friend, a widow, who thought of marrying again, but had not quite made up her mind.

On this particular morning, the last of September, Ann sat at a table in the window answering a pile of letters while Mrs. Barrington pursued her studies near the fire.

It was the same room in which they had taken tea on that first afternoon, but there were now no shadows sufficiently deep to appear capable of holding anything, and the suggestive influence of the old man and the wild companions who had caroused there, seemed as cleanly dissipated by soap and fresh air as the smoke and dust which had once disfigured the walls and ceiling. Flowers stood on a table—the window was open to the balmy air—and when Mrs. Barrington rose ponderously to speak to a workman, it did seem to Ann as if nearly the whole of the first interview in this room must have been a dream.

Only, as Mrs. Barrington went out, she paused at the door and set the same train of thought going again.

“So tiresome, these electric bells,” she said casually. “But I was obliged to have them put in, because we could not keep any servants with the old-fashioned kind. Maids naturally felt nervous when the bells all rang out with a sudden jangle, and they knew no mortal hands had been ringing.”

“What was it, then?” said Ann.

“Oh, mischievous spirits,” said Mrs. Barrington, going out.

A minute or two later Captain Barrington came in by the long window.

"My aunt's not here?" he said, which was a concession to convention, for he had just seen her in the hall.

"No. She is seeing about the bells," said Ann. "Captain Barrington—*did* they ring all by themselves like that?"

He sat down on a corner of the great writing-table, smiling across at her.

"Yes. That's true enough. I've heard 'em."

"Well, this is a queer house," said Ann.

"And we're queer people, eh?"

Ann bent over her work and presented to the on-looker a very charming aspect of girlishness, her dark hair shadowing those adorably innocent cheeks and her long eyelashes lowered.

Captain Barrington smiled again as he looked at her. The contrast of her appearance with what he had just been hearing about her tickled his slight interest in her and made it itch for a little verbal satisfaction.

"I say—I'm thinking of taking lodgings in Sea-view Terrace."

"Why?" The blood flew to Ann's face as she glanced up at him, though she did not, as a rule, flush easily; but it astounded her to have already got so far upon the path she had marked out for herself.

"Oh—I've heard that angels fly in at the windows—and I've always wanted to catch an angel unawares."

"What!" Ann jumped up from her seat. "Who told you. How did you know?"

He rose, too, and stood near her.

"I know nothing. I see nothing. I'm like that awful child I saw in some play or other."

"But you know how it was? I was fastened in and my landlady might have been bleeding to death. I didn't think. I just went."

"Bravo!" he said, touching her very lightly on the shoulder. She did not resent it, and he began to think he knew where he was and to be in one way less interested in her, though in another more so.

"Oh, there was no danger," she said. "Any girl could have done it."

"Any girl wouldn't," he said.

And again his point of view changed a little; he was impressed by that honest fearlessness of Ann's which shone plainly enough through her demeanour as she stood there in the sunshine.

"I can't imagine you being frightened in any physical danger," he said.

"Oh——" She paused, and added lightly, "I'm frightened now."

His eyes gleamed for a second as he touched her arm.

"What!"

"I'm afraid of Mrs. Barrington getting to know."

"Ah!" He drew back. "Is that all?"

"Why, yes." She looked up at him inquiringly, and he thought how well she did it.

"You need not worry about that," he said, with a laugh which she did not understand. "I'll see she hears nothing about the matter. Or that it is properly explained if she should chance to find out."

Then they heard Mrs. Barrington's footstep outside,

and he went through the long window again into the garden; for he respected the shrewdness which lay behind his aunt's engrossment in heavenly matters, and he did not think it well that she should know too much about his friendship with her young secretary.

For the rest of the morning the two ladies carried on their various occupations uninterruptedly, and in the afternoon Ann went for a walk on the shore. After tea, however, she determined that it was time at last to write a long letter to her people at home, when Mrs. Walker came in, very much dressed and as sprightly as ever in spite of a still bandaged hand.

"I've had two tickets given for the farewell concert of the Pierrots to-night," she announced, "and I wondered if you would care to come with me?"

"Oh, thank you very much——" hesitated Ann, looking at her writing-paper.

"I only just suggested it, thinking you might be lonely," said Mrs. Walker, backing out with an air of some offence. "But I can easily ask Miss Linskill."

"I should like to go," said Ann quickly. "It was only my letter home—I can write to-morrow."

So Mrs. Walker retired, to emerge resplendent in a rakish toque and a feather boa, and as she and her lodger walked down the terrace, she said gaily—

"Two ladies living together—we can often go about like this—pleasanter for both of us."

But it was in going down to the tent erected on the cliff, in the full blast of the North Sea breezes, that she showed most plainly what deportment and dress may do for a person. A favourite pierrot, respectfully familiar and yet not too familiar, himself conducted her to her seat. Three neighbours all tried to bow to

her at once. A girl in the back rows, enviously regarding the toque, murmured, "Old ewe dressed lamb fashion."

Ann, in a tweed coat and skirt, was for the moment an unconsidered satellite; but soon the audience began to put heads together, and to whisper of wheelbarrows and morning climbs, nodding mysteriously towards Ann's straight back.

For almost all the visitors had gone away, and most of the people gathered under the canvas roof in the flaring light were inhabitants of Wodenscar, come to this farewell concert because they were conscious of a brotherly feeling towards these pierrots who had also been toiling all the season to amuse the mutual enemy by whom they all lived.

And when the neighbours had finished discussing Mrs. Walker and her friend, they fell into that delightful vein of conversation, which every one knows, when a difficult and profitable undertaking is just over. There is, in this talk at the end of the season in little seaside places, some of the reminiscent thrill of joy in victory when survivors gather round safe firesides to fight their battles over again.

You could hear it from every part of the tent while the pierrots moved about, nervously eager and jocular, waiting for the performance to begin. As, for instance, "Can you believe that a *lady* would ask for a single chicken-leg in again?" Or, "They might say the ink-stain was there when they came, I know better. But I have my living to earn, and I couldn't tell her she was a liar." Or, in a carefully lowered tone, "The goings on, my dear! But there, they paid all I asked, and never had a thing in twice!"

It was Mrs. Walker herself, speaking to a neighbour on the other side, who summed the matter up—

“Letting houses or letting rooms, it just comes to this—visitors get all they can out of you, and you’re a fool if you don’t pay ’em back in their own coin.”

But there was no talk at all about the lodgers who come to Wodenscar, even in the season, poor and ill and lonely, and are tended less for gain than for pure human-kindness.

To-night was gay. To-night was the end of the harvest. And all save the exceptionally unlucky ones, like Miss Linskill in the terrace, had money to jingle.

Just as the performance started some of the villa residents began to rustle in rather conscious of being a cut above their company, while the back benches filled with half-grown lads and girls tricked out in imitation of the ‘flapper’ of the comic papers. The songs were blatant, inexpressibly vulgar, though, in a sense, sufficiently ‘refined’ to avoid shocking the susceptibilities of any one; but through it all could be traced the innate love of the English race for kindness and courage and home. The ideal, when all was said and done, remained a little house where a lad and a girl could be happy man and wife together.

The wind began to rise outside, so that the sides of the tent creaked and bellied in the strong gusts, but the audience sat on quite unmoved; that boom and roar was part of their lives and they thought nothing of it. The pierrots continued to sing and dance the summer out with that deep sound beneath their light, jingling chorus which made it, somehow, infinitely pathetic. They and the tent perched on the cliff top and the people listening—and before and behind it all

the countless procession of summers along that edge of the North Sea.

The eagerness of the pierrots and the one rather faded pierrette to please the 'patrons,' and their excited, nervous eyes, and voices tired with the strain of the season, made them seem more than ever ephemeral—poor butterflies, driven inland at the approach of winter.

Even the solidity of the filled benches could not take away from the peculiar effect of transitoriness which it all had—which it emphasized, so that every one felt a little strange regret. They thought this was because the pierrots sang a good-bye chorus and the summer was over, but it was really because they had seen for a moment how soon life was over.

A gloom settled down on the audience. They refused to laugh even when the chief pierrot made topical jokes about the Urban District Council; but at last a comic song caused a faint ripple, an encore deepened it to a general burst of laughter, and the chief pierrot mopped, cautiously, the beads of effort from his brow. He had pulled the thing together.

It is a horrible moment when that spirit which makes any entertainment alive departs, like a soul from a body, leaving only a dead weight behind. Every public entertainer knows this, and the pierrot felt intensely grateful to a tall gentleman at the back who had helped him over the crisis by jolly laughter as well as persistent applause.

Ann also detected the source of that applause and laughter, but she refrained, not without difficulty, from turning her head.

"There's Captain Barrington," whispered Mrs. Walker. "He's coming this way."

"Oh!" said Ann, studying her programme. "The next is a little sketch."

"He's here!" flustered Mrs. Walker. "Shall I make way for him, or——"

"Sit still!" commanded Ann.

But he found a place behind them, and said discreetly over Ann's shoulder—

"Well, how do you like music-hall and water to the accompaniment of the North Sea?"

"Oh, I'm enjoying it," said Ann, all aglow now. "But I think it must be dreadful to get your living by pleasing people. To have to depend on that, you know. It seems——" She paused. "It must make you different."

He looked at the exquisite line of neck and chin turned towards him in silence for a moment; then he gave a little laugh.

"Poor beggars! I felt a sympathy with them. It's only what I'm doing."

"What nonsense!"

"And you're doing, for the matter of that."

"I don't see——" murmured Ann.

"Don't you? Well, we've both got to please my aunt or lose our job, haven't we?"

"Not you. Why, she's made her will——" Ann caught herself up.

There was something a little mocking and ironical in the glance Captain Barrington bestowed on that innocent profile as he replied lightly—

"Her will? What do you know about it? Be-

sides, you can count on no man's will made while he can hold a pen—or a woman's either."

"Oh, every one knows everything in Wodenscar," said Ann, turning her head towards the stage. "Hush, they are starting another song."

The audience was once more in the right mood, and, from a sort of reaction, they now let themselves go in an odd access of emotion. They shouted the foolish, harmless words of the chorus, as a colony of household crickets might chirp in the face of a tempest, and the wind, laughing, shrieking, bellowing, raced along the cliff without noticing that they were there.

But all at once there was a strange noise in the tent—a rending and groaning of canvas and timber, a flame shooting up into a black sky, the shrieks of women, men shouting contradictory commands.

Ann felt Barrington's arm slip round her, grasping her firmly.

"Come," he said. "I can get you out of this. Hold fast to me. There's no danger at all if they'll only go quietly."

"Mrs. Walker!" Ann exclaimed hurriedly. "I can't leave Mrs. Walker."

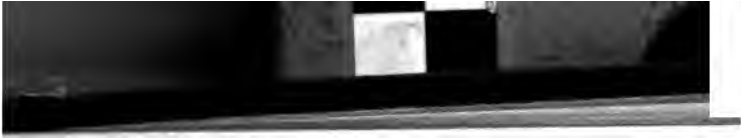
"I can't—two of you."

"I won't leave Mrs. Walker."

"All right. I'll try."

Then the men nearest the sides of the tent began to rip great slits in it, and the congestion lessened; the little handful of people gradually crept out upon the edge of the North Sea.

Behind them the tent flamed up towards the quiet stars for a while and flickered out. The light shone



DOOR-HANDLES—AND THINGS 55

on all those wondering, troubled faces, and on the white dresses of the pierrots, flitting in and out between the darker figures. And below them the waves rushed upon the shore.

Once more there was that strange feeling abroad which had threatened to destroy the concert earlier in the evening, only it was intensified. For a moment these people felt a tremendous longing to seize hold upon something stable and eternal—something which would restore to them the blessed sensation of permanence.

And the feeling of the crowd focussed, as it usually does, in the person who is nearest to the state of mind at which the rest unconsciously desire to arrive.

A tall, lank man moved a little apart until he stood grotesquely outlined against the sea and sky in the flare of the burning tent.

“My friends,” he said, lifting his hand, “let us sing a hymn to the praise and glory of God.” Then he struck up in a strong, rough voice, accustomed to leading in the local chapel, “O God, our help in ages past!”

One by one all the rest joined in. The women first, with little catches of the breath and wet eyes, the girls pale with emotion, the elder men solemnly, the young men at first nudging each other as if to make it a joke, but carried away at last into a bellowing sincerity, the tired pierrette with hands clasping and unclasping.

It was something to remember, to think of long after, when life seemed very narrow in Wodenscar, the desperate hopefulness of that hymn shouted out

across the North Sea by a handful of frightened, tired people.

An odd pause followed, with the wild wind booming through it; then the boys and girls at the back began to giggle, in a reaction from the tension of that high moment. The middle-aged pierrette could be heard complaining. Finally Barrington raised his voice and called cheerily—

“I say, the collection comes next, doesn't it?”

Several people near laughed as he took off his cap and stuffed a five-pound note into its recesses.

“Let Captain go round,” they said.

“All right,” said Barrington. “I'm a good beggar. Always have been, ever since I could ask for toffee.”

He held out his cap as he spoke, and the lads near him laughed good-naturedly and put in coppers which they had intended to spend on cigarettes. The women gave sixpences. Fathers of families drew out small change and cast it in without counting. And to every single person who gave in that little crowd the gift meant something. Barrington's five pounds—though his neighbours thought he could line his wardrobe with them—meant pinching a bit somewhere, for he was always hard up. Ann's half-sovereign, Mrs. Walker's shilling—they had all the same glory of real sacrifice.

A self-indulgent man of the world as high priest, and a jumble of villa residents, lodging-house keepers, and village boys and girls to bring the offering, and yet no ceremony ever held on that wild coast had held a deeper significance.

And it was, above all, English. In spite of all that is justly said against us, there is a glory in remember-

ing that such a scene is more likely to take place in England than anywhere else in the world.

That sudden impulse to show pity by generous giving is a great quality, and it is the natural instinct of the English people.

But nobody in the crowd thought of such a thing for a moment. They did it, they knew not why, just as they loved and feared and hated, and though some of them regretted the impulse afterwards, they were the better for it. Old enemies drew together, wondering whether sixpence would not, after all, have done instead of a shilling, and yet the warmth of having given the shilling drew them together.

Mrs. Walker spoke to a lady from whom she had been long estranged over a matter of a charwoman, and Ann was left alone for a moment, thrilling a little too, with the sense of splendour which was abroad that night.

She stood with parted lips, gazing in front of her, thinking vaguely that life was splendid—splendid!

Then she noticed Barrington pause on the edge of the crowd and make his way, after a moment's hesitation, to some one standing alone a few yards away.

The man turned at his approach, and it was Finlay, hastily thrusting his hand into his pocket.

"I don't know if you care——?" said Barrington.

"Of course. Hard luck on the pierrots."

Then Barrington returned, and murmured in passing to Ann—

"I didn't know whether to ask him. And yet it seemed pointed to leave him out. I always feel so sorry for that chap."

By this time the cap had been taken over by the leader of the hymn, and the pierrots with the one pierrette had grouped themselves stagily near the débris of the burnt-out tent, which still leapt and smouldered where the wooden seats were heaped together; but in spite of their theatrical air a wistful gratitude and eagerness to respond as these people wished gleamed out of their eager eyes. They waited, half ruined, for their cue, with the sort of bravery that went to Ann's heart. She could always understand courage.

At the last moment she ran forward, thrusting her way through the crowd, and shook the contents of her purse into the cap.

No one noticed her do it save the man holding the cap, because of the jostle and excitement of the approaching presentation, but the action placed her quite near the pierrots, who were trying to smile with strained lips, while they pretended to seem unconcerned, as the tall grocer deliberately counted the coins in the cap by the light of a naphtha torch which some one held, flaring, near him.

They waited there, like poor last flowers of summer blown upon the shore, oddly pitiful in their soiled white uniform of folly, and when it was announced at last that a sum of twenty-one pounds had been collected, the pierrette forgot to act and acted better than she had ever done in all her life.

She just flung out her empty hand and cried, "Thank you! Thank you!" with the tears streaming down her painted cheeks.

Then the crowd broke up and every one went home, talking of what had happened, and of Barrington, and



DOOR-HANDLES—AND THINGS 59

of the gallant way in which he had behaved to Mrs. Barrington's secretary.

But the gossips also said that he had no more intention of marrying Ann than of marrying Mrs. Walker; and the gossips, for once, were quite right.

CHAPTER IV

A SEA LION

THE gale continued for three days, and the terrace, looking out of little bow windows, abused the wind according to immemorial custom in Wodenscar.

But it was wind which gave life to the little town, teasing, rollicking, whistling, like something eternally young, and the young folk laughed with it, the middle-aged bore it, and the old dreamed of heaven as a place where there was no wind.

Everyone, however, objected to the spray on the windows, because it is not in human nature to do otherwise. A blank gleaming surface one moment, and the next, a dull pane covered with an infinity of tiniest drops of sea-water.

All the same, life seen through that salt haze underwent a sort of sea change; you looked out at a world which was filled with hardship and tears and bitterness, and yet, somehow, splendid.

So it had looked to generations long past, and that outlook was in the blood of the Wodenscar people, in the very walls of the little grey houses, in the cliffs themselves.

Ann grew hardier from living in the place, and felt an extraordinary sense of vigour and capability. She was afraid of nothing. Everything was sure to come to her.



Mrs. Walker often made discreet references to the night on which the tent was burnt, and to Captain Barrington's gallant behaviour; but something else seemed to lurk at the back of her mind, and it popped forth, unexpectedly, when Ann said one day that she had been invited to dine and sleep at the Red Grange.

"Captain Barrington——" began Mrs. Walker, and paused.

"What of him?"

"Him!" Now Mrs. Walker let it go. "Him! He'd always have a girl on every gooseberry bush. Bear that in mind."

Two nights later, Ann sat at the dinner-table of the Red Grange and remembered nothing at all about these other young ladies. It was quite enough for her that she wore her prettiest frock, and she entirely failed to connect that debonair, natural, pleasantly-smiling man with any gooseberry bush save the one upon which she might be supposedly enthroned.

But perhaps it was, after all, the prickly uncertainty of her position and the exciting prospect of being clutched out of it by Captain Barrington, which made Ann radiate during dinner a clear joyfulness that was as pretty to look at as the joy of a child.

The party was small, because the neighbours whom Mrs. Barrington usually invited to her table were not particularly fond of meeting her friend Mr. Bagshaw—an astrologist from London, with very pronounced views which he insisted on airing in season and out of season—anyway while so ardent a disciple as Mrs. Barrington was within hearing.

The doctor and his wife, therefore, with an odd

young man who seemed to possess too many thumbs, formed the rest of the circle, and Ann talked to the doctor of the great Drinking-water Question which is a never-failing subject of conversation in Wodenscar.

But through this ripple of talk she could hear the flowing accents of Mr. Bagshaw and the enthusiastic monosyllables of his hostess, and at last Mrs. Barrington leaned forward, massive in red brocade, and drew the rest of the little party into their conversation:

"Mr. Bagshaw and I," she said impressively, "have been discussing the question of physical beauty. He agrees with me that the soul shines through. A person with a beautiful soul is bound to be, in a way, beautiful."

"Quite so," said Mr. Bagshaw, folding his hands.

"I don't agree with you," said Dr. Gray. "I have known the most beautiful people with ugly souls and vice versa."

Mr. Bagshaw beamed upon the doctor with a benign vagueness.

"Ah, the point of view! It all depends on the point of view."

"How true!" sighed Mrs. Barrington. "You always see things from such a *large* standpoint."

Mr. Bagshaw nodded solemnly, and as he did so, Ann knew all at once of what he had reminded her ever since she first saw him. He was, with his drooping moustache, large hands flaccid at the wrist, and long body, most comically like a sea-lion which she had seen performing at a circus the week before. She found it difficult to repress a sudden giggle, and Mr. Bagshaw's sharp eyes detected in her a lack of reverential attention.

"Won't you tell us the joke?" he said uneasily, for he was abnormally sensitive to ridicule.

Ann flushed crimson to find herself detected, and stammered out, "Oh, there was no joke. I—I was laughing at—at the Water Question."

"Ah!" said Mr. Bagshaw. Then he turned pointedly to his hostess once again and became engrossed in his own conversation.

Ann was subdued for a moment, but she said to the doctor as they rose from the table—

"I can't make it all out, can you?"

"No one ever has," said the doctor. "But a good many saints and sages have spent their lives in trying, you know. And nobody can afford to make light of a study that was already old in the dawn of history."

"But surely you don't think there is anything in it?" said Ann.

"I?" He handed her the gloves which she had let fall, and she saw the lines on his face which had been brought there by weariness, and looking at so much pain and sorrow. "I wouldn't, for my life, destroy one thought that's of any comfort to any human being."

"What's that?" laughed Barrington. "Miss Middleton wanting comfort?"

"Not yet—thank God!" said the doctor gaily. "She gives it instead."

"Oh, how?"

"By looking as if she didn't want it."

So this rather preoccupied, middle-aged man had also noticed the radiant quality in Ann, and in truth she followed Mrs. Barrington and the doctor's wife into the hall as if treading on air. The men very soon

joined them, and every one sat round the open hearth where old Courtenay had so often smoked and drank with the strange seafaring company he used to gather about him. The wind rushed down the chimney, causing the logs to hiss and flicker; it was just such a night as he would have loved.

And, strangely enough, these people sitting round the hearth which had been his for so many years, were drawn from the contemplation of the near, urgent subjects which filled each mind to an insistent thought of him. It was, almost, as if he stood there in the shadows, grinning with malicious gaiety upon these interlopers, making them remember him.

Mr. Bagshaw was the principal talker, and his long, ridiculous face was hidden from Ann by the ears of the great post-boy chair which he occupied, but his undoubtedly fine and sympathetic voice flowed on, impressing his listeners with an odd sense of truth, of inevitableness.

He spoke of other things usually accounted supernatural as if they were the ascertained facts of every day, and after a while those hearing him were bound to share this feeling, even though only for the moment.

The strange mantle under which this mean, money-grubbing man hid his meanness was so splendid that it gave him, for the moment, a sort of impressive splendour. The glory and wonder which has been kept alight through terrible persecution by mystics of all ages shone a little through the words of this very unworthy follower, because he used their words.

It was now quite plain to Ann how he had obtained his ascendancy over a woman of Mrs. Barrington's active, though discursive, intelligence. She, herself,

a fairly level-headed young person, with her psychical side quite undeveloped, was yet moved to a sort of scared belief in what she regarded as 'ghosts.' When the circle round the fire broke up and she undressed alone in the yawning bedroom assigned to her, she was disturbed to notice a curious old foot-rest near the arm-chair, because the conviction shot into her mind that this had been the room in which old Courtenay died.

She turned her eyes away, continuing her toilette, but she was obliged to look back at that empty chair and the foot-rest near. She now remembered having heard how he refused to die in bed, but would sit up to the end, waiting to face the great enemy of which he had never been afraid.

She thrilled a little; it was fine to think of a man who had never been afraid of death.

Then, suddenly, she felt a most strange sensation as if something had drawn near—and yet there was nothing.

The medley of thoughts and stories which she had heard that evening rushed through her brain as she stood in the dim, candle-lit room, shrinking from she knew not what, and yet with every nerve end tingling to the sensation that a presence was there.

She forced herself to keep quiet, not to run away; and as she waited, motionless, a white, girlish figure amid the dark old wardrobes and cabinets, she heard a low, chuckling laugh.

Perhaps it was not laughter. Perhaps it was only the sound of the wind in the chimney, or the creaking of the old furniture, or the skurrying rats in the wain-
-ant

But it was laughter to Ann. Without waiting to think she ran across the room and out into the corridor. All there was also dim, but at least she could see the doors of other inhabited rooms. In the distance she heard Mr. Bagshaw coughing. She could have embraced him for that raucous yelp. There were other faint sounds in the house, then all grew very quiet. But once outside that room she could not make up her mind to go back. Every time she put her hand on the door-knob her heart failed her. She remembered so plainly the sound of that faint, chuckling laugh in the darkness.

She grew very cold and heavy with sleep, leaning there against the wall, but she would not go to any one or call the servants. At least, she was not coward enough for that. A clock on the corridor ticked heavily—heavily—no other sound. Everybody was asleep.

Then slow footsteps, dragging a little, like the footsteps of a very old man, came round the end of the corridor. But Ann could not move. She just pressed closer to the wall and shut her eyes, sick with fear. She opened them, and Captain Barrington in a pair of loose old house-slippers stood before her.

For a moment she could not speak. The relief was too great.

And he, after an instant's blank astonishment, came close to her and whispered softly—

“Dear—so you were waiting for me?”

Ann stared at him out of her white face, not taking in his meaning.

“I daren't go back into that room. I know he died there. I—I've heard something.”



“Poor little girl! Of course you’re frightened,” he said, smiling, and he took her hand.

But as he pressed it his face quite changed. The icy coldness of those inert fingers made him realize his mistake, and he turned scarlet as he stood there in the dim corridor.

“I—I say—I’m sorry—you really *are* frightened to death.”

“I was, said Ann, rather faintly. “I’m all right now.”

She turned to go into her room, but her eyes still gleamed black in her white face like those of a frightened animal, and she shuddered involuntarily as she put her foot over the threshold.

He did not touch her again, but stood on the mat and whispered urgently, “Come back! I’m not going to let you go in there. It’s sheer cruelty. All that talk about the supernatural downstairs has unnerved you, and no wonder.”

“I’ve been very stupid. I shall be all right now,” repeated Ann. “Please go now.”

“No. No. I can’t leave you like this,” said Barington. “And I can’t call the servants very well. I’d better go to my aunt.”

“Oh, please don’t,” urged Ann, startled. “You know she’d never think anything of me again for being so foolish. I’ll go to bed now. I don’t mind really.”

“You do mind,” he said bluntly. “I won’t have you scared to death like this. I haven’t forgotten what I felt like when I was a kid and had night terrors.” He stood, bothered and repentant, outside in the corridor. Then an idea came to him. “I say

—there's a good fire in the hall. Let's go down and sit there for a bit until you feel reassured."

Ann hesitated, looking down and thinking. Her nervous terror had now abated, though her heart was still thumping against her ribs with the after-effect of it. And she was not really afraid to go back, though the prospect of a night in that room remained unpleasant. But she began to see this was a chance not to be missed. The stereotyped ideas of romance which she had unconsciously gained through a long course of novel reading, made her feel that this was a situation which must undoubtedly lead to the altar at the end of the volume if properly managed.

So she looked up at Barrington and said modestly—

"I should like to, if you think it would be all right."

"'Course it will," said Barrington. "Come on."

As Ann tripped before him down the stairs she was very glad that she had on her white dressing-gown and new satin petticoat, and the conventional romance of the affair also appealed to Barrington, who felt instinctively that this would be another delightful picture to adorn that gallery in his recollection, which he reserved for such subjects. But behind that was another feeling, more definite. He was ashamed of himself for having spoken to Ann as he had done, though she had, fortunately, failed to see his meaning, and he wished to atone, by an added respect, for misunderstanding a pretty, innocent girl.

That, in his code, which was not a rigid one, was a blackguardly thing to do, and he mentally kicked himself as he followed Ann's slim figure and meek head down the stairs. More than that, he began to

think he had been mistaken all along. Those little advances, which had, indeed, seemed to him exactly like the ordinary tactics of the ordinary, rather on-coming little girl, appeared now in a different light. She might not have been trying to get up a flirtation at all. Those rather crude advances might be only an evidence of a very charming innocence.

Then she glanced round at him—mistaken Ann—and his judgment kicked. No. She did mean to make up to him.

All the same, she meant it all quite differently from what he had thought, of so much he still felt assured; and, indeed, there was a passionless cleanness about Ann, standing slim in the firelight, which no man of experience could go on mistaking. To himself, being under no obligation to mince matters, he put it plainly, even while he drew up an arm-chair for her with the utmost caution and asked her in a whisper to sit down. He said to himself, that, while she might want him, she certainly did not want to kiss him—at present.

He crept about, putting on more wood, and making careless little remarks to put her at her ease, but the conviction that Ann had no real desire for love-making caused him to feel that it would be rather pleasant to make love to her. Her long hair fell in a great plait almost to her knees, and had the sheen of a bird's wing in the firelight. There was an exquisite flush on the round cheek nearest to him.

He began to speculate about her; and once a man begins to speculate about a woman anything may happen.

But for the present he was not at all likely to do more than speculate, though his attitude was very

lover-like as he knelt at Ann's feet, coaxing the logs to burn brighter. And they really made a very charming picture, surrounded by the warm gloom of the panelled hall with the gallery above them just faintly showing in the light of one old leaded lantern. He, a fine, handsome figure, with a touch of restraint in his manner and bearing which lent him that distinction he sometimes lacked, and she, tenderly virginal in her long plait and white draperies.

They laughed and talked together, gradually forgetting to whisper, until Ann thought it was time to go upstairs. And now she began to feel ashamed of her fear. It seemed incredible to her that she could have known that access of sheer, uncontrollable terror only an hour or two ago.

So she was quite sincere when she said, holding out her hand—

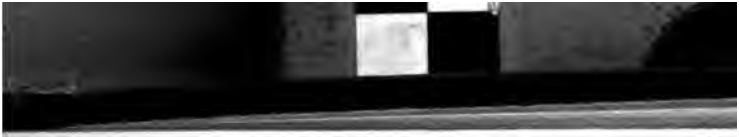
"I'm awfully ashamed of myself. Thank you very, very much. I can't think how I could have been such an idiot."

"I'm glad," he said. "It's such an endearing thing to find out the cowardly spot in any brave person."

"Is it?" said Ann. "Well, anyway, I am glad you found it, and not Mrs. Barrington or Mr. Bagshaw."

"Bagshaw!" Barrington laughed. "Oh, I know now what I wanted to ask you. Why did you look so amused at dinner?"

"I ought not to have done," said Ann. "But he"—she began to laugh—"he *does* look so awfully like a performing sea-lion. I felt that if I threw him my dinner roll he wouldn't be *able* to help catching it on his nose."



“Ha! ha!” laughed Barrington. “I see it. I shall always think——”

“Hush!” whispered Ann, startled, looking up at the gallery. “What’s that?”

“Nothing,” he said reassuringly. “You’re all on edge. You’d fancy——”

“It’s him!”

“What!” Barrington whirled round and peered up into the gloom. “By Jove! Bagshaw!”

“Ahem!” said Mr. Bagshaw, leaning over the gallery near the lantern. “I thought I heard somebody moving, so I came out. I feared burglars. I sleep with my door and window open, always, and I detected footsteps and voices.”

“People who sleep with their door and window open shouldn’t go to stay in other people’s houses,” muttered Barrington.

“What’s that?” said Bagshaw, putting one of the large, flapping hands to his ear and leaning further over the gallery.

“Nothing. I’m sorry to have disturbed you,” said Barrington.

“No. No,” said Bagshaw. “On the contrary. I’m sorry to have disturbed you.”

And he went away to his own room again, without another word. They heard his bedroom slippers slopping after him.

Barrington waited until that sound had ceased, and then turned to Ann.

“Now, what the dickens does the fellow mean by that? If I weren’t afraid of making a row for your sake, I’d jolly well go and ask him.”

Ann frowned. “He means anything you like, or

he likes. He's a wonderful hand at speeches like that."

"The question is, what will he make of this to my aunt?" said Barrington.

"Please go and ask him not to tell her."

Barrington looked perplexed and worried.

"I don't quite like to do that," he said.

"But Mrs. Barrington might misunderstand——"

"I suppose she might. Of course, she'd be more or less bound to. Still—she'd take my word——"

"It places me in an odious position," pleaded Ann.

"Yes, yes. It does. All right, I'll go," said Barrington, turning reluctantly towards the stairs.

But as he crept down the corridor he felt annoyed with Ann for being the cause of all this, and when he reached the prophet's chamber, he stood for a moment by the open door without knocking. He did find it so exceedingly difficult to bring the request over his tongue. At last, however, he forced himself to say jerkily—

"May I come in? I just want to explain——"

"Of course," said Mr. Bagshaw, sitting up in bed, a dim, grey mass in the unlighted room. "Pray come in."

"The fact is," said Barrington, standing awkwardly by the bed, "that's your—er—wonderfully eloquent way of relating your experiences rather unnerved Miss Middleton. She was sleeping in the room which used to be old Courtenay's, and having heard all sorts of queer tales about him, she—er—fancied she saw or heard something, and ran out, terrified, into the corridor." Barrington paused for breath, feeling he had

done that rather neatly, and added, "It was quite natural. Any girl might."

"Oh, yes. Any girl might," agreed Mr. Bagshaw most cordially; so there seemed no reason whatever for Barrington to feel that sudden inclination to 'go for' the bulky mass of grey whiteness.

But, justly or unjustly, he could scarcely bring himself to finish the explanation with due civility. And his tone was very abrupt as he continued, after a pause—

"She was shivering and frightened to death, so I brought her down to the hall-fire. I didn't know what else to do. But as my aunt might possibly be annoyed, and as the whole thing was entirely my doing, I feel obliged to protect Miss Middleton from any unpleasant consequences. This being the case I—er—I must ask you, as a personal favour, not to mention the matter to my aunt."

"I will do as you wish, of course," said Mr. Bagshaw, and Barrington could see him heave forward politely in the gloom.

"And you quite understand?"

"Perfectly," said Mr. Bagshaw. "Perfectly. I quite understand."

"Thank you. Good-night," said Barrington, and he walked away down the corridor wishing he had never set eyes on Ann. But it was not quite the first time that his partiality for that agreeable portion of the female sex which involves but does not extricate had led him into unpleasant situations, and the sight of Ann's pretty, eager face at the top of the hall stairs almost restored his good humour.

"It's all right," he said in a very low tone, because they were now near Mrs. Barrington's bedroom. "Bagshaw is going to keep his own counsel."

"That's a mercy," whispered Ann, unclasping her hands with a sigh of relief.

"I suppose so," agreed Barrington. "But if he does give us away now, it will look twenty times worse."

Us!

The music of that word is as hackneyed as the Wedding March, which continues, just the same, to rouse more emotions than the finest opera ever written. It caused Ann to see love and money and happiness within her grasp, and it removed the last remnant of Barrington's vexation.

"Oh, he won't give us away," said Ann, with a little thrill in her voice. "I'm quite sure it will be all right. Everything will be all right. And I'm not the least bit frightened now." She held out her hand. "Good-night."

He kept it, looking down at her.

"This is our secret, then?"

"We've had to let the sea-lion in. And he'll have a shocking opinion of me," said Ann, laughing a little excitedly, under her breath.

"What's that matter?" said Barrington.

CHAPTER V

WINTER

WINTER settled down on Wodenscar. Black winds raged constantly about the little place; you could hear them howling like wolves at night, wolves of hunger and pain.

Hunger, of course, only found its way into the little houses, or into the big ones that were yawning, empty and garnished, for 'visitors' who could not be expected until the summer; but pain went everywhere. Lights shone out at nights from villa residences where fat business men were battling with bronchitis, or women hung agonized over their children; and pain was in the mean row of cottages where the fishermen of Wodenscar had lived when the town was still a fishing village.

But through all this the stronger ones bloomed with an extraordinary vividness of health and vitality. The children ran along the streets to school with shining eyes and cheeks glowing like roses at high summer. The girls were flushed with a lovely, fresh brightness which was like nothing else but the colour of youth, and even the middle-age women, calling, shopping, going out to work, had their faces freshened to a healthy red like the glow of a winter apple.

The very tailor, standing at his shop door, had a jolly crimson on his cheeks which would have made of him a splendid railway-station poster, with "Come

to Wodenscar and collar a complexion" beneath it.

So no wonder that Ann very soon ceased to disturb herself about the possible consequences of that little midnight interview with Captain Barrington. She came, indeed, to have a glorious feeling that nothing mattered. She was bound to get what she wanted, simply because she wanted it.

In this mood she walked home one day from the Red Grange, pausing on her way to buy a cake from the low, old shop in the market-place. For her own little income, in addition to the salary paid her by Mrs. Barrington, made her able to afford anything she pleased in the way of small luxuries, and the rich brown cake displayed in the bow window made her feel hungry.

Captain Barrington was out hunting to-day, but he had lent her a charming book, which she intended to read while consuming the cake and tea in her gay little sitting-room, which often had dust in the corners, but was always spruced up by Mrs. Walker to a sort of jaunty cheerfulness against her return.

As she went through the terrace she saw Miss Linskill, with shawl ablow, fastening up a rose-tree which had been torn down. It was some days since this neighbour had been seen by the terrace, for the unattached women in Wodenscar who let lodgings are apt to lie in bed very late in the morning during winter-time, in order to save fuel. And they get into the way of staying in the house if they are middle-aged, during the short hours when it is pleasant to face the boisterous air from the North Sea. Their attitude, really, is a little like that of an actress in the daytime, during those darkest months of winter.

Ann paused to call out a cheery greeting as she passed, and, though she was not at all interested in middle-aged old maids at this time of her life, she could not help observing the pinched hopelessness of Miss Linskill's face. And out of her own joyousness came a careless desire to lighten that dull look for the moment.

"Oh, Miss Linskill, I wonder if you would accept this cake?" she said impulsively. "I bought it as I passed the shop because it looked nice, and now I remember that Mrs. Walker made me a fresh one only yesterday. She will be so offended. Do, please take it!"

And with this Ann slipped the parcel inside the railings without waiting for thanks.

Five minutes later she saw Miss Linskill go past her bow window like a whirlwind; there were voices in the little hall, a door banged, and Mrs. Walker was projected into the room as if by an explosion.

"Well?" said Ann.

"This!" exclaimed Mrs. Walker, very red and trembling. "This is your cake?"

"It was," said Ann.

"Then, Miss Linskill's compliments, and she has already more cake in her larder than she can consume."

"Oh!" said Ann. "And does that mean she won't take the cake? I'd take a cake from any one."

"No, you wouldn't. Nor I wouldn't—not if I couldn't afford to buy one myself." Mrs. Walker paused, drew breath, pulled in her waist and stood facing Ann. "You're not interested in the terrace. Nobody blames you. But anybody can see you aren't."

And you've got to be interested in people before you understand them, and to understand them if you want to love them, and to love them if you're to really help them." She paused again, brought up short with the shock of her own vehemence. "I don't know why it goes like that—but it does!"

Ann stared. Mrs. Walker! And she had always thought herself so very much wiser than Mrs. Walker, smiling with conscious indulgence upon that lady's weaknesses.

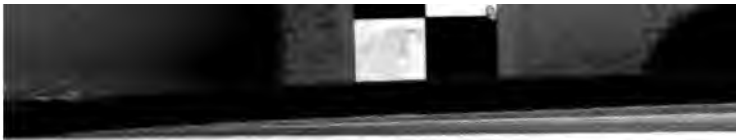
"Yes, that's how it does go, I suppose," she said thoughtfully. "Well, I'll give any spare cake I have to Gertie next time."

"No, no. You mustn't take it like that, Miss Middleton," said Mrs. Walker. "You can't know what it is to fight and work and nearly starve to keep your independence. A woman who does that thinks such a lot of her independence that she's always frightened of somebody robbing her of a bit of it. I know. In the days before I was married I once lived on bread and tea for a fortnight. I know."

It showed how moved Mrs. Walker was, in thus voicing the hidden feeling of the terrace that she should speak of her marriage as an event which had not taken place when she was twenty; for she resented greatly, in an ordinary way, any allusion to the fact that Mr. Walker had 'hung up his hat' in her house only a few years previously.

But for the moment she was beyond or beneath all that—at the heart of life as she knew it.

"You can't be expected to understand," she concluded, "and it doesn't signify to you. You're not



going to belong to this sort of thing. You're not going to live your life in a little terrace house."

"You never know," said Ann; but she smiled to herself at the thought of it, for Sea-view Terrace, with its little gardens and bow windows, was no more to her than a springboard from which she meant to leap upward.

So she settled down comfortably to her new book, and had tea over the fire, and dismissed the whole matter from her mind. It could have no possible consequence for her in that sunshiny picture which she pictured as she fed Gertie with the despised cake.

But it is a most rash thing to assume that any trivial happening in the world can be of no importance, for this seems to set such events, as it were, upon their mettle—to make them show what they *can* do.

Anyway, Ann felt little desire to see the plum cake again, and gave Gertie a portion which proved too much for even that excellent animal's iron constitution, and as a direct consequence the household was late astir, Mrs. Walker distracted, and Ann, in common decency, unable to go callously to bed.

It was when she did retire, at about a quarter to one, that the despised cake caused her to find out something very intimate about her next-door neighbour. For, but for it, she would have been in bed and asleep instead of looking out to see whether the slight frost which had threatened to stop hunting that day was likely to strengthen. She hoped very much that this might be the case, for Captain Barrington was constantly away now, when he was not busily engaged at

home or on the estate. Until that morning, when he had given her the book as he went through the hall in his riding clothes, he had not spoken to her for a fortnight.

So she searched the heavens with a natural anxiety, but saw no sign of a settled frost. The wind was still high, and had driven a great cloud across the moon; a tremendous sea was running. No one seemed to be abroad in the wild night, and she stayed a moment by the open window, in spite of the cold, excited by the clash and uproar of the wind and waves.

Then the cloud passed over so that the moon shone out again, and for a moment, in that sudden gleaming moonlight, Ann saw Finlay's white face turned up towards the window.

The booming of wind and sea had prevented her hearing his light footfall, but he was there in the next little garden, looking straight up at her, and she, arrested, gazed down at him.

They were held so for a moment; neither could have turned away their eyes had their lives depended on it. And something seemed to pass between them. Some message deeper than words or thoughts, which neither of them could in the least understand. There, in the moonlight, they were filled with an emotion so intense that it produced a great stillness, like a wheel that whirls so rapidly as to appear immobile.

Then Ann breathed deeply, and drew back from the window without speaking a word; but she felt again, most strangely, the grip of Finlay's hands as he had drawn her out of the clay-hole. She had a physical sense of his touch, light and yet as firm as steel, and

her face looked pale to herself as she brushed her hair before the looking-glass.

Even when she was in bed her thoughts turned uneasily towards that night on the cliff, and she wished she had tried to be kinder to the man who had saved her life. Though he was so reserved and never attempted to speak to her, she knew instinctively that she might have made a friend of him. She realized, without knowing how or why, that it was in her power to help him out of his Slough of Despond, if she would; and yet she did not intend to do it. She was not going to jeopardize Mrs. Barrington's favour and all it meant, by a friendship with a man of whom that lady so strongly disapproved. But, turning over to sleep at last, she determined to speak to him when they met. He had established, somehow, his right to that, during that moment in the moonlight underneath her window.

Next morning there was a sort of sequel to all this, for Mrs. Walker came into the room at breakfast-time with a newspaper open in her hands and the recovered Gertie at her heels, to give news concerning the gentleman next door.

"Just look!" she said. "The lady Mr. Finlay was engaged to before he went to prison got married yesterday. Poor feller, I wonder how he felt."

"Glad to be rid of a girl who would throw him over when he was in trouble, I expect," retorted Ann, with an inexplicable desire to cover up Finlay's wound from the eyes of Mrs. Walker.

"Ah, well, I did hear she was pretty and very well off. It wasn't likely her parents would consent.

Poor Mr. Finlay! He seems to have no luck. Some people get all the luck and some people get none, and all the clever ones in the world can preach and talk and go on for evermore, but they can't make any different of it. Look at Mr. Finlay and Captain Barrington now! And yesterday would have been the poor young man's wedding day if he had been her husband. Eh, dear! No wonder he was walking late last night. I heard him come in."

Ann rose from the table with a flush on her cheeks, stupidly, unreasonably irritated with Mrs. Walker.

"I bet you anything," she said, "that Mr. Finlay was not even thinking about her when he came in."

Mrs. Walker bent down and stroked Gertie sentimentally.

"Wait till you've been engaged yourself," she said, "and then you'll understand what it is to have a broken heart."

"Why, had *you* ever a broken heart?" demanded Ann, still in the heat of that queer unreasonable annoyance.

"Me!" Mrs. Walker stood up at once, very erect. "Me, indeed! I kept my heart in my own keeping till it got strong enough to stand heat—and cold, too. But everybody hasn't the sense, have they, Gertie, my pet? Oh, there is the poor young man! Overslept, and no wonder!"

Ann looked out of the window and saw Finlay running at a swift, even pace along the wind-bitten promenade; he looked small and shabby in the strong morning light, and the feeling she had experienced for him the night before seemed all at once unaccountable. But this was, in some strange way, a great re-

lief to her; and she sang as she put on her hat to go to the Red Grange.

A slight change in the arrangements there now obliged Ann sometimes to remain until late in the afternoon, and on two or three such occasions Captain Barrington had walked home with her.

At first they came through the village, defying gossip, but the last time Ann had said, deprecatingly in the face of a dark evening and a whistling North-easter, that she thought they would find it more pleasant to walk home by the sands.

Barrington at once agreed, and they ploughed along together through a heavy sand—for the shore at Wodenscar changes constantly—and in a noise of wind and sea which scarcely permitted them to hear each other's voices. Perhaps the non-success of that walk had made Barrington all the more willing to seek distraction elsewhere, and formed one reason why a fortnight had elapsed without his making any of those opportunities which he knew quite well how to create, if he wished to do so.

On this particular day, however, he chanced to find Ann alone in the morning-room when he went in, and she wore a new frock, quakerishly made, of a sort of pansy colour, which was very becoming to her dark hair. The contrast of his thoughts about her, and her actual appearance, created a disturbance in Barrington's emotions which caused him to forget momentarily the eligible young lady with whom he had of late been hunting three days a week, and to postpone his errand until his aunt returned to the room of her own accord.

"I say"—he sat down on a corner of the writing-

table—"that dress is awfully pretty. You don't mind my saying so, do you?"

"You're very kind," said Ann, going on with her writing. And she seemed so aloof that Barrington felt impelled to desert his cautious attitude, and to do something to establish the old relations between them.

"Nothing been heard of old Bagshaw, you see. He is not going to say anything."

"No." For some reason Ann found it easy as well as wise to be distant this morning. "I never thought he would."

"Oh! Come! I say," began Barrington. Then they heard Mrs. Barrington at the door, and he bent over Ann to whisper hurriedly, "Are you staying later to-day?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"May I walk back with you?"

"Oh, I don't quite know what time——"

Then Mrs. Barrington entered, and no more was said. But there is no doubt that Captain Barrington would have been greatly surprised if Ann had slipped away without allowing him the chance of following her, while Ann would have been surprised and offended had he failed to do so.

As it was, however, they found themselves about six o'clock of a dark, still evening emerging from the shadow of the cliffs upon the shore at dead low water. The sand was untrodden and delightful to walk upon, having been left firm and yet elastic by an out-going tide. The wind had dropped earlier in the day, and only the thud of the surf remained to show that a storm had been.

They talked first of all about Mr. Bagshaw, drawing together over that most unromantic subject, until, when Ann stumbled over a large stone on the sand and nearly fell, Barrington steadied her with a hand through her arm and kept it there. They were both apt enough at making pleasant conversation, and their talk was punctuated by little bursts of laughter. They both felt that it was delightful to be walking and talking in this way, and the touch of restraint which still clung about Ann, in spite of their going so intimately together, provoked Barrington into a greater ardour than he would have imagined possible when he was on the hunting-field the previous day.

He began to be obsessed by only one idea, that he wanted to kiss Ann's cheek just where it was shaded by the curtain of dark hair. She bloomed dimly beside him in the salt twilight reflected from the sea, and the smell of the sea was in her hair and clothes.

"I say, what's sea-lavender?" he asked abruptly, in a silence he felt bound to break somehow.

"I don't know. Never seen any," laughed Ann, with that excited sense of elation which a girl experiences when she first feels her power, though she has no idea of the extent of it.

"Well"—he pressed closer to her—"I haven't either. But I think you must be like it, somehow—Ann."

Ann's heart began to beat. She thought how nice he was, and how handsome, and she liked to feel his hand within her arm, holding her safe.

Then another pair of lovers suddenly emerged upon them from the shadow of a breakwater and went on into the shadows, and a moment after, in the absolute

stillness which came between the long hushes of the waves on the shingle, they heard the sound of a kiss.

Barrington laughed softly, then drew Ann closer to him.

“I say, you do rather like me, don't you?”

“Yes,” said Ann.

“Dear little girl,” he said, and kissed her.

She trembled a little, but stood there between his hands like a caught bird, and he kissed her again.

“Ann, Ann,” he whispered. “You're so sweet. I never knew before how sweet you were. Won't you kiss me?”

She put up her lips to his and he touched their exquisite freshness with a restraint which showed that he felt something more for Ann than he knew.

“Darling—you like it—you don't mind?” he murmured, holding her to him.

Ann pressed her face against his shoulder, not speaking; this was her first taste of love-making, and she felt a little intoxicated by it, shy and excitedly happy, as nine out of ten girls will, when they are first kissed by a pleasant, virile man whom they are going to marry.

At last she drew back, subtly pale in the grey light which drew the colour from her face as well as from the sands and sea, and said, in a little haste of sudden apprehension—

“Goodness! I wonder how Mrs. Barrington will take it?”

“Take what?”

“Why, our engagement.”

“Engagement!”

If ever a gallant captain looked like a pricked bal-

loon, Captain Arthur Barrington did so at that moment.

“Engagement!” he repeated. “You—you don’t mean to say that you—I thought every one was aware——” He drew breath and went for it again. “Every one knows I haven’t a penny of my own. I can’t possibly afford to marry. I’m not a marrying man. I thought everybody knew—I’m so awfully sorry.”

Ann said nothing at all. She just turned towards the sea and began to cry quietly from sheer, bitter disappointment. Wealth, position, happiness—all seemingly within her grasp and now as far off as they had ever been! Ann was disheartened at last. She had her first real doubt, staring out at that grey sea, lest life might not be going to give her all she wanted.

“I say,” began Barrington again, close beside her, “I’m most awfully sorry. I wouldn’t have made you unhappy for the world.”

But Ann just wept dismally on and did not even trouble to reply, though if she had tried every wile available to women, she could not have found a better way to touch his heart. As she stood there, with her head bent a little, slim against the faint radiance of the water, she made an almost irresistible appeal to the kindly, pleasure-loving man.

“Ann—do say something——” he urged.

“What’s the use?” she said dully, beginning to walk on.

He plodded beside her, the sand being heavier as they neared the parade, and neither spoke. They mounted the steps and crossed the gardens, where at this time of the year a few gas lamps burned drearily

in the wide expanse. The same couple whom they had seen on the shore were now whispering together on one of the damp seats, courting rheumatism to add to the joys of life on thirty shillings a week.

Barrington's firm footsteps echoed together with the fall of Ann's lighter ones as they walked together down the broad, asphalted space fronting the sea, and at the far end, nearest the terrace, Ann paused under the last gas lamp.

"I am at home now. There is no need for you to come any further," she said, looking away from him.

But as she turned her face so, he saw the light shine on her round, wet cheeks, and the sight moved him unaccountably. He had seen a woman's tears shed on his account before, but they had never caused in him this sudden, melting tenderness, as if his whole being were craving to dry those tears, come what might.

"I can't leave you like this, Ann," he said, with a slight hoarseness catching his voice. "Promise you won't cry when you get home."

"It doesn't matter," said Ann flatly. "Good-night."

"Stop. I'm—I don't know what to say. I behaved disgracefully in kissing you like that."

"I let you," said Ann, glancing back for a second over her shoulder. "You wouldn't have done it if I hadn't let you. Good-night."

And that, somehow, made the last irresistible appeal to Barrington.

"Look here," he said. "Let us go on being friends. Perhaps something may happen. I may make myself so useful to my aunt that she will be ready to give



me an allowance large enough to marry on. I kissed you because I'm so awfully fond of you, Ann. I couldn't help it. Will you forgive me?"

"Yes," said Ann. "I forgive you. It's all right. Only you can't bring back my never having kissed anybody."

"No!" He was close to her again. "No, and, by Jove, I don't want to! Ann, kiss me good-night!" His arms were round her. "My dear, we'll find some way. I can't do without you. I can't do without you!"

But the other lovers, who with all the wide space of winter Wodenscar still seemed bound to run into them that evening, emerged suddenly under the gleam of the next lamp-post. Barrington pulled Ann aside into the shadow of a wooden shelter and whispered quickly—

"Then we're friends, Ann?"

"Yes."

"Yes, Arthur?"

"Arthur."

"My dearest little girl!"

So they parted, slipping away with light feet on the grass, while the other couple gazed bemusedly out to sea.

CHAPTER VI

THE INEVITABLE HAPPENS

CHRISTMAS DAY fell in the next week, when Ann went to her father's house and found that odd mixture of nearness and distance which follows the first long absence from the home of childhood. She noticed how careworn her father looked after his day's work, and saw that her stepmother was too 'dressy' to be ever well dressed, and that the sister who had filled her vacant place was rather afraid lest she might want it back again.

They had all receded, while the events at Woden-scar stood out in the clear foreground of her mind, and she was in such a hurry to take up the chain of little daily events which made her life there that she felt only a slight regret in waving farewell to her father from the train on her departure.

He had a tiresome confinement on his mind and waved back, a little preoccupied, poor man, by the pressure of a long list of engagements which would keep him hard at it until dinner-time. He loved his daughter, but had he been less engrossed by making a living he would perhaps have realized that it is rather dangerous to keep a girl in leading-strings until she is twenty-three, and then to turn her suddenly loose on a strange road. However, he was only unfeignedly glad that she looked so well in health, and after bestowing upon her a five-pound note which he



THE INEVITABLE HAPPENS 91

could not too well spare, he hurried off to his day's work, without any further immediate thought of her.

Ann was to resume her duties at the Red Grange on Monday morning, and, this being Saturday, she sat in her bow-windowed room on her return to Wodenscar, eating chocolate from the magnificent satin box which Barrington had sent her, and urging her eager thoughts towards the future, so that she never even saw the pretty moment in which she was then waiting: all life before her, and happy love certain enough for hope, but not quite certain, still a quest, still at that glorious stage when a visit to morning church can beckon enchantingly though the church-goer be not ardently religious.

Ann smiled, thinking of the next morning when Barrington would look at her across the bent heads of the worshippers; it would be thrilling to know that they had kissed while every one yet took them for strangers—Captain Barrington, whom all the girls in the villa residences admired and would have been glad to be seen speaking to—and he loved her.

She chose a strawberry cream, her favourite kind, and swallowed it in a sort of rapture. The room was all bowery with further additions of paper flowers which Mrs. Walker had received at Christmas; the light filtered through the yellow lamp-shade upon them like sunshine.

Ann had no idea whatever that such was the case, but she was almost perfectly happy—not a deep happiness, but something very light and bright and clear.

So no wonder she entered the church the next morning with a sort of glow and joyousness about her which, subdued to the usages of worship, made Bar-

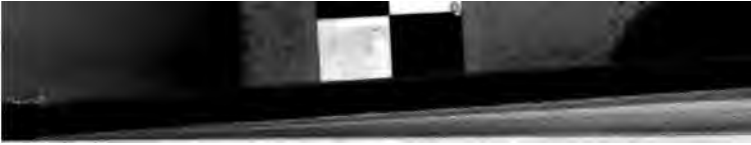
rington think of girls walking among apple-boughs in the dawn of the world. He was not usually imaginative, but that is what he thought as he looked across at Ann with her head bent over her hymn-book. And he was on fire to walk home with her again through the darkness with the boom of the sea in his ears. He could almost feel now the salt air on his lips, and the freshness of her kiss.

The rather dull reaction which always affects the service on the Sunday next after Christmas passed quite unnoticed by these two, though Mrs. Barrington sat mountainous in her corner and felt permeated by it. But there never was any great sympathy between the Red Grange and the Rectory, for Mrs. Barrington did not consider the rector sufficiently spiritual for his office. In this she was perhaps correct, but he also had his side of the question, and was accustomed to say that he could never feel quite at his ease with a lady who knew he had been a mule in his last incarnation and feared he might be something much worse in his next.

So she closed her eyes when he went up into the pulpit, and meditated on Mr. Bagshaw's last letter while the rector discoursed of love.

I suppose, without being in any way profane, that very few young people at the point of high romance are able to hear the beautiful texts on that subject without feeling that they are heavenly truths with an earthly reflection, like stars in clear water. Anyway, they did seem to shine that morning in the hearts of all the lovers in that grey church—the very word, 'love,' being radiant, making glory.

But the rector was quite plainly gazing upwards,



THE INEVITABLE HAPPENS 93

trying, as it seemed, to find some guidance for everyday living.

"When we take the backward look over our lives," he said, "the look we must take if we grow old, we see it is only love that really matters—the love we have gained and the love we have given. Most of all, the love we have given."

"Love!" echoed Ann's thoughts. "I wonder if I shall meet him going out of church."

"Love!" echoed Barrington's more ardently. "How sweet she looks! How sweet she looks!"

"Love," said the rector, "is the immortal spark in all mortality—the core of chaos."

"Ah!" reflected Mrs. Barrington, opening one eye. "He is beginning to think. He is talking about chaos."

The rector leaned over the pulpit and said his last word, looking straight towards Ann, though he did not see her. And Ann heard, but paid no heed at all, though the words, of course, floated into those dim recesses of the mind where are kept all words that ever vibrate the ear-drums.

"Love," said the rector, "is the cause of life, the meaning of life, the end of life." He paused and concluded slowly, "Nothing but love and sorrow can give courage of soul."

Then the people rustled to their feet, and church was over. Ann emerged with the rest into the clear grey light of the Yorkshire morning, and when the congregation talked together among the green graves of those long dead, there was the same impression of fugitiveness as on that night of the tent-burning on the cliff—and yet there was a further, and deeper,

impression of permanence. As if, beneath the little lives of those who laugh and cry for a minute and are gone, were something continuous, eternal.

"Excellent sermon," said one.

"I like something stronger," said another. "Something more definite."

"Pity he doesn't give up quarrelling with his relatives before he talks about love," said a third. "I did hear——"

And so on, while the Angel of God, quite certainly, stood at the porch in the sunshine and looked, smiling, after them, and knew that love would one day bring them home.

Ann followed the little stream of people to the gate where Mrs. Barrington's motor was waiting, and that mountainous lady gave point to the whole atmosphere of the Sunday morning by leaning forth, a little breathless, and repeating, "'Nothing but love and sorrow can give courage of soul.' I liked that. That was more than I expected from the rector." Then she turned to her nephew. "Coming, Arthur?"

So he got into the car and it slipped away into the bright freshness of the seaside day, leaving Ann to walk home with a memory of his gay look as they parted, a look which said, "We've a jolly secret; it's a glorious day. Isn't life jolly?"

Ann walked along down the village street, meeting the salt air that blew up from the sea, and knowing that life was jolly. She almost made Finlay throw reason overboard and think so too when they encountered in the terrace.

"Had a pleasant Christmas?" he said gaily, spontaneously, before he remembered to say nothing. Her



THE INEVITABLE HAPPENS 95

sunshine was so clear that for the moment it dispersed the shadow over him.

"Yes, thank you," she said, passing on, bearing in mind the fact that she was not to be too friendly with Finlay. Then something—community of youth, clear brightness of the day—made her turn quickly and call after him—

"Mr. Finlay! I had a box of such lovely violets at Christmas——"

He stopped, and looked at her from his side of the railing.

"Oh!" Then after an infinitesimal pause he added, "I expect you got a lot of lovely things."

"I had no more violets. And I love violets," said Ann, going into her door. Then just on the threshold she spoke again, with her back to Finlay. "There was a piece of poetry in the bottom of the box—but no name. Wasn't that funny?"

"Very," said Finlay.

Then both doors banged, and in half-an-hour's time Ann and her neighbour were both eating Yorkshire pudding within a few yards of each other, though many people thousands of miles apart remain less separate.

The next morning Ann resumed her secretarial work at the Red Grange, but she had no conversation with Barrington, because he was out hunting. The two ladies went to the meet in the car, and were charmed, as any one must have been, by the grouping of the field against the grey background of a beautiful historic house. Though it was morning, there was a strange glow of sunset about the scene—the glow which comes at the end of a day in history that has

been good and bad and is nearly over—so nearly over that one remembers most the good.

Barrington rode about among these men and girls, many of whom he had known slightly all his life, and he was a real part of that pageant. Ann felt jealous as she leaned forward from her place beside Mrs. Barrington and saw him laughing with a couple of pretty, weather-beaten girls, keen, eager, enduring Yorkshire sportswomen.

Several of the riders came up to chat with Mrs. Barrington, who had hunted in this county as a girl and was still familiar with every fence and covert. She, too, in spite of all her new ideas, belonged to this old world of a Yorkshire hunting morning, and while disapproving entirely of fox-hunting, she yet enjoyed going to the meet, and would as soon have given instructions for poisoning Ann as for poisoning a fox in order to prevent its being hunted. But she remained a very short time, and Captain Barrington only managed to reach the car just as it was starting.

“I shall be home in time for tea,” he said. “Miss Middleton had better copy out those accounts we were speaking of, and I will see her about them when I get back.”

Mrs. Barrington looked at him affectionately; she was proud of her handsome nephew in his stained red coat on the big bay horse.

“How thoughtful he is!” she murmured, as the car moved on. “Dear Arthur!”

Then she patted Ann’s hand as they went along in the sunshine, and said pleasantly—

“I’m a lucky woman to have such a good nephew and a good secretary. You are your father’s own

daughter, my dear. I don't know a better or more conscientious man, and though I promised him that I would not try to influence you in regard to the views I hold on spiritual matters, I do begin to feel that you are with us at heart. Is not that so?"

"There's a great deal to admire," said Ann, taking a leaf from the book of the oracular Mr. Bagshaw.

And she had excellent cause to remember that gentleman's methods, for long letters were sent to him at least once a week, demanding instruction, or expressing gratitude for advice received. Sometimes whole pages from various books had to be copied out for his inspection; he formed, indeed, the pivot of interest upon which Mrs. Barrington's rather monotonous life turned. But there was something fine in the second-hand views he exploited, and it was that eternal fineness in all mysticism which appealed to Mrs. Barrington. She had, indeed, an illogical, discursive mind, but a soul attuned to higher things—waiting, as so many are, to respond to that which they know exists, though they cannot yet find it.

Ann began to be very fond of this old, discursive woman, and she worked far harder than the terms of their original agreement had demanded: for whatever she might be, she was no idler. She brought the whole strength of her clear intelligence to bear upon the housekeeping problems which had troubled Mrs. Barrington for a long time, though it was very difficult to do this without offending the old housekeeper. However, it was done, and the internal arrangements of the Red Grange ran more smoothly than they had done since old Ralph Courtenay ruled there with a rod of iron.

This particular morning was a very busy one, and when Ann showed Barrington, on his return, the result of her labours, he smiled across at his aunt with a jocular—

“I say—if there ever are female Chancellors of the Exchequer, I back Miss Middleton for the post.”

“Dear Ann,” said Mrs. Barrington, for to this point of intimacy had they come. “She has such a head for figures. And yet she looks as if she couldn’t tell five from eight.”

“Ah, but she can!” laughed Barrington. And they all three laughed gaily together in the fireglow—the light picking out the huge pattern of red flowers on Mrs. Barrington’s dark brocade, just as it had done on that evening when they first sat there together.

But there was, when Ann rose, a sense of something impending, though all words spoken were of the barest and most commonplace.

“Well, it’s time I was going.”

“The night’s very dark. I’ll walk a little way with you—just beyond the plantation.”

“I am ordering the car. You’ll be tired.”

Thus the trio, and Mrs. Barrington pressed the bell.

“I shall enjoy the walk,” said Barrington. “I’m a bit stiff. Glad to stretch my legs—unless Miss Middleton prefers to drive.”

Ann’s face was towards the light, she looked at them, most clear and innocent.

“I want the air, too. I’d really rather walk. I don’t get enough exercise nowadays.”

There was the faintest pause, then Mrs. Barrington turned to the servant who had answered the bell and said quietly—



THE INEVITABLE HAPPENS 99

“Tell them to send the car round at once.”

So Ann went home in state, unaccompanied, excepting by a suspicion that the shrewdness which slept somewhere in Mrs. Barrington's character had chosen this inauspicious moment to awake. It was quite evident that she was not going to favour any philandering between her nephew and the girl whom her old acquaintance, Dr. Middleton, had entrusted to her care.

But when two people live within a couple of miles of each other and meet almost daily, they can easily find opportunities to walk and talk in the twilight if they wish to do so. And at least twice a week, during those lengthening evenings of February, did Barrington go home with Ann along the lonely beach, where they rarely met anything more likely to gossip than a sea-gull.

There was, in spite of Ann's readiness to be caressed, a sort of virginal quality still about her which increased Barrington's ardour with every meeting. But it was not only that—her ready intelligence made him respect her, and he was inclined to be more seriously in love than he had ever been in his life before.

But he still felt matrimony to be out of the question, and made no secret of the fact, so that Ann began to wonder whether this sort of thing would go on until she grew faded, or he cooled down and married the pretty, weather-beaten young lady who was so eminently suitable. She thought pensively upon the vicar of her earliest dreams, and the young man of her next, as she walked up the terrace after one of these abortive promenades.

She thought and thought as she sat over her tea, and felt sad because she was very fond of Barrington

—she was sure it would be delightful to spend her life with him. But there was a vein of obstinacy in him which she dared not arouse by argument, so she went to bed, sighing, because nothing seemed likely to happen.

It is, however, just at this moment of despair that the truly intelligent begin to think out ways to make things happen. And for the first time in her life, Ann spent a sleepless night. But she could not devise any means by which a willing lover could be transformed into a reluctant husband, because she was not by nature designing, though ambitious and greedy of happiness.

Still the vigil had told, even on triumphant youth, so when Mrs. Walker came in with the breakfast she remarked that the spring was trying and recommended pink pills for pale people.

Later in the day Mrs. Barrington also made a remark to the same effect, advising cod-liver oil, and after that Ann sat by the window doggedly writing to dictation while the crocus bloomed just outside and the birds sang. Eventually, Mrs. Barrington went out, and her nephew joined her in the garden. Ann watched them go together across the grass in the sunshine, and thought with dreary aimlessness that Mrs. Barrington looked ill—no doubt the spring weather was trying her too.

In a few minutes' time Barrington walked back across the lawn alone, and Ann knew he was coming into the morning-room to say good-bye before departing upon a business journey into Scotland. But the same sort of thing had happened several times before, and she knew it meant nothing. She did not even



THE INEVITABLE HAPPENS 101

turn round when he came into the room and spoke her name. So after a moment's pause, and a glance through the window at the empty lawn, he leaned over her chair and put his hand on her shoulder.

"Why, Ann," he said, "what's the matter? Are you vexed with me?"

"Oh, no," said Ann, looking dully out of the window. "There's nothing to be vexed about."

"But you are. And it's such a lovely morning—so fresh and jolly—I say, Ann, it reminded me of you. That's why I had to come in."

She glanced round at that, half smiling, and he kissed her. What with flowers and sunshine and young love, it was very pleasant in the silent room. Then an old voice, raucous with angry astonishment, fell like a blow upon that scented quiet.

"Arthur!" exclaimed Mrs. Barrington, and the caught lovers swung round to see her standing purple-faced in the doorway.

"I—I was just correcting a mistake in this letter Miss Middleton is writing," said Barrington quickly.

"I'm neither blind nor a fool, Arthur," said Mrs. Barrington in a great rage, advancing into the room. "I am ashamed of you. And I am greatly surprised that Miss Middleton should permit such a liberty. I do not expect my secretary to behave like a housemaid."

"But housemaids are so correct, aunt," interposed Barrington, startled into uneasy flippancy. "I always consider that a housemaid is the most proper looking person in the world next to an archbishop——"

"Don't talk nonsense," said Mrs. Barrington. "I wish to hear what Miss Middleton has to say."

"The only wonder is that you never found out before," replied Ann flatly. "There's nothing to say." She rose. "I'd better go."

"You don't care!" exclaimed Mrs. Barrington.

Ann said nothing, and continued her way to the door. As a matter of fact, at that moment she did not care about anything, for she saw her chance of happiness again receding. Captain Barrington had almost joined the popular vicar and the moderately affluent young man in her mind by the time she reached the threshold. It was past—done—and she was thoroughly disheartened.

But no speech in the whole realm of language could have moved Barrington as did that silent crossing of the room with bent head and cheeks pale with the sleeplessness of last night and the final disappointment of this morning. He took her indifference for an immense generosity, and all the decent gentleman in him rose up to meet it on equal terms.

"No!" he said, "it's not going to end like this. If you won't speak, I will. I've behaved pretty badly, but I'm not quite such a cur as to let it go at that. I say—aunt—it's been my fault from the first. Ann—well, you know what Ann is—I couldn't help falling in love with her, though I'm not in a position to marry. Now you know all about it."

Ann stood staring at him, breathless with joy and surprise, as he stormed up to her and put his hand protectingly through her arm.

"There!" he concluded, rather breathlessly. "You're mine now. I'm going to take care of you."

Then, at last, Mrs. Barrington again found her voice.

"I blame myself," she said. "I ought not to have thrown you together. Only, to tell you the truth, Arthur, I thought you were too much of a gentleman to take advantage of my secretary, and too selfish to marry a poor woman. I don't yet feel happy about it."

"And why not?" said Barrington. "Ann's family is as good as ours. She is good and clever and sweet—what more can a man want?"

"I've always thought you wanted a good deal of money, Arthur," said Mrs. Barrington, rather curtly.

And it is a fact that he himself was conscious of behaving rather well, when he flung back at her—

"What's money, when you care for a girl as I do for Ann?"

"Oh, Arthur!" breathed Ann, trembling with excitement.

Mrs. Barrington smiled at last, but there was shrewdness as well as a reluctant indulgence in her smile.

"Well," she said, "I suppose you know you are not likely to starve while I'm here. But I must have time to think the matter over. In the meantime you had better go to Scotland as arranged, and Ann can take a few days' holiday." She glanced from one to the other, kind and uneasy. "I like Ann very much, and you know how I have always felt towards the nephew of my dear husband," she added, "but I can't think, somehow, that you will be happy together."

"Well," said Barrington, putting his arm about

Ann, and facing his aunt in a very pleasant, manly fashion. "It's up to us to prove that. And we will. Won't we, Ann?"

But a sleepless night, sudden revulsion of feeling and this triumphant end had proved too much for Ann, and she could only sob out helplessly—

"I'm—I'm so happy now, that I don't know what to do."

Tears came into Mrs. Barrington's own eyes, not for what she saw, but for what she thought to have long forgotten. Her heart ached under that mountain of flesh as a heart will in a barren, far-off country, at a breath of wind which seems to smell of primroses.

"Believe me," she said earnestly, in that deep, rather booming voice of hers, "that I love you both. And that my only thought is for your happiness. But you must give me time."

CHAPTER VII

REALITY

DURING the week that followed Ann lived in an atmosphere of new paint, furniture polish and freshly scrubbed floors: to the end of her life, the combined odours of spring cleaning brought back to her a sense of opening joys and happy emotion. Everything she had wanted ever since she grew up—in a word, happiness—seemed to be waiting gloriously for her at the end of that week.

And the weather was what Wodenscar people expect at that high climax of the spring cleaning—sunny, windy, cold, with a sharp brightness about the days which lets not a grain of dust go undiscovered. This is the time when house-owners become so engrossed that they let their friends and acquaintances drop out of the scheme of things altogether. Husbands, coming wearily in to eat, are glad to get out again, and the clank of hurrying feet on uncarpeted stairs resounds through every house.

But with it all there is for the women a sense of exhilaration; a hurrying, bustling, splendid sense of being indispensable in the world, and a looking forward to the months of open air and sunshine.

In the terrace this spirit was roused by so much wind and so much sun to a point of frantic activity. It became a fever, an obsession, until, one by one, the houses where visitors might be expected began to

show spotless curtains behind glistening panes which a high wind from the east might dull at any minute. The word 'Apartments' lurked, chaste and unobtrusive, between glass and clean starched muslin.

Mrs. Walker, still taut and trim, with a paint-pot in one hand and a brush in the other, was almost the last to finish. And her methods were different from those prevailing elsewhere, being a substitution of mind for brute force.

"No," she said to Ann, "I'm not over-done. But I don't believe in all this scrubbing. It's bad for the scrubber and it's bad for what's scrubbed. Look at this room," and she flung open her own apartment. "I don't think you'll better that in Wodenscar. And all, as you may say, done by kindness. A lick of paint's worth half a day's work, any day."

Indeed, as Ann's week of probation drew to an end, there could not have been found in England a house which gave more the impression of shining, glistening cleanness. Light paint, white bedding, the very upright chairs adorned with muslin and ribbons so that they stood round like children at a party.

No wonder that, in all this rush and fury of renovation, Miss Linskill was forgotten. Ann might perhaps have remembered, but the splendid future opening out before her made everything near seem rather dim and indistinct. At last, however, when she came up the terrace one morning after a jolly, blustering walk on the shore, she did notice how dingy the house looked beside its spruce neighbours and remarked on this when her landlady brought in her midday meal.

"Miss Linskill!" exclaimed Mrs. Walker. "Why, I haven't been out for a fortnight, and I never thought



THE STORY

about the...
 the...
 would...
 always...
 just...
 the...
 there is...
 Electric...
 couldn't...
 It was...
 time...
 where...
 certain...
 and on...
 during...
 "Miss...
 with...
 and...
 then...
 together...
 and Mrs...
 Soon a...
 apart...
 hands...
 wind. Three...
 morning...
 but...
 For it...
 never...
 could, scared...

09

ut
ed

sl
n-

er

ig
ll

ed
ut

ep
to
ot

of
ier

g in
ved
nent
rted,
to do

Walker
in the

away, the
de
ust



up at the bedroom window with a growing sense of hideous apprehension.

"I dare say she sleeps in the other room," whispered one.

"The larder window's unfastened," said a maid, running round from the back.

Then they all went quietly, whispering and trembling, round to the back, where they stood about in the little yard. A maid began to cry.

"You climb in at the window, Harriet, and open the door for us," said her mistress sharply.

"Oh, I daresent, I daresent—I'll give in my notice first," said the girl.

"Then I will!" said Mrs. Walker, making a brave effort to scramble upon the narrow window-sill. "Us all standing here, and maybe that poor thing——"

"No, no. Let me," said Ann; and after a precarious moment of balancing, half in and half out, she managed to push down the stiff window and squeeze herself through the small aperture.

Once inside, the house seemed extraordinarily still, but there was no one to be seen, and she flung open the front door, letting the little crowd surge into the place as if it were no longer the home of any one. Two or three of the women went up the stairs, but slowly, as if they greatly feared what they might find there. And after a moment of strange silence some one gave a cry.

The rest crowded the little, narrow stairs, looking up with white faces.

"What is it? What is it?"

A door closed. The three women came forth, faint and trembling.

Mrs. Walker opened her lips and tried to speak, but no words came; then she tried again, and gasped out—

“Dead! She’ll have been dead two or three days! And us laughing and talking and doing our cleaning!”

“I knew she’d a weak heart, poor thing, but I never thought——” wept another.

“We must send for her relatives—she has nothing nearer than a cousin—her brothers and sisters are all gone. Poor Miss Linskill!” said a third.

Ann stood listening to that name as it was passed about—Miss Linskill; nobody to call her anything but that.

The poignant loneliness of that death stabbed deep into a region of feeling in Ann which had been hitherto undisturbed. Here was reality. Here was life, not as you wanted it to be, but as it was.

That woman had been young, too, had been full of hope, too, and now she died with nobody to call her by her Christian name.

No matter that this was so futile as to be nothing in face of all the rest—it was just the point which moved Ann to an immense pity and regret. For a moment the clouds of her own young self-engrossment parted, and she saw the world of lonely women, longed to do something for them, to comfort them.

“We shall have to wire to the cousin,” Mrs. Walker was saying. “But I’ll take the responsibility in the meantime. Things must be seen to at once.”

So very soon the little crowd melted away, the blinds were drawn down; there was death, decorous and usual, in the terrace. Next day a fat cousin came

from the south, shivering in the eager air of Wodenscar, and on the following morning the funeral took place.

Mrs. Walker had trimmed a black toque, and came to ask Ann's opinion of it just before starting.

"I always think," she said, with tears running down her cheeks, "that you want to be more particular about black being stylish than anything. It's all in the set of it. Is this high enough at the side?"

She stood in the morning light in the little grey room, looking eagerly at Ann, her toque set jauntily, and yet grieved to the heart for the poor neighbour who was gone.

Ann scarcely glanced at her, feeling it so strange that any one should be concerned about the bow on a hat at such a moment.

"It's all right," she said, rising in her own old black coat and skirt and a plain hat she had bought in the village. She looked shabby, and her face was pale and her eyes sombre, and yet under the shadow of that wide, plain hat she was extraordinarily touching—a very picture of youth first meeting sorrow. "I suppose it's time we were going. I've never been to a funeral before."

"Well, you've got to start some time. You'll have to go to a-many," replied Mrs. Walker rather briskly. "My word, the flowers are lovely! Everybody in Wodenscar who ever knew her seems to have sent. It seems"—Mrs. Walker paused—"it seems as if they wanted to show that, after all, she had plenty of friends. And only the week before she died she asked me to go in. She said the evenings"—Mrs. Walker broke off with a catch in her voice—"and I said I



was too busy with the cleaning. I do wish I had gone in."

"Well, it's too late for us all now," said Ann. "I expect a good many people are feeling like that today."

"And they'll forget again to-morrow." She paused, wiped her eyes, and set her toque at a slightly jauntier angle. "After all, my idea—heaven's a place where you'll have a chance to go back and do all the kind things you wish you'd done here. If you've once *thought* of them they must be——"

But Mrs. Walker had started a train of thought too big for her, and glanced off with a cursory—

"Well, if you're ready, it's time you were off. I'm afraid you can't go with me in the mourning coach."

"No, no," said Ann hastily; "I'll go round by the sea. I have plenty of time."

As she walked rather quickly along the shore, she saw Finlay in front of her, clad in dark clothes; he turned at her approach to wish her good-day, and they walked along together—a thing unavoidable, there being no one else upon the wide stretch of sand.

"I see you are going to the funeral," he said.

"Yes; are you? I thought you were too busy in the daytime."

Ann was not interested in him, nor in any one, just then; her whole mind was in a turmoil of realization. Life—bare, ugly, wonderful, beautiful life—had jugged out above her dreams, and she could not get used to the sight of it.

"I am busy," he said, "but—I wanted to go. Such loneliness——" He paused. "Good God! The loneliness there is in the world!"

She glanced aside, pale, slim, exquisitely virginal against the expanse of brownish water which gleamed with the strange radiance of a million opals.

"Are you very lonely?" she said.

He looked quickly at her, then walked on, making no reply. At last he said abruptly—

"I'm all right."

After that they went on again in silence until they joined the little groups, mostly women, who dotted the grey, sunny bleakness of the village street. The bell tolled out: "Gone! Gone! Gone! Gone!" Then they came in sight of the bell tower, pointing to the sky.

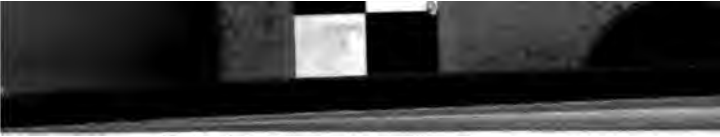
Soon they were kneeling together among the congregation. The air was most sweet with the smell of spring flowers. The lonely woman was at last surrounded with company.

The people rose and sang out with the same splendid, desperate hopefulness which had pierced Ann's understanding that night of the tent-burning on the cliff. The old church, grey with the centuries, and they a shadow on its pavement, gone like a shadow.

And yet they were conscious of something eternal within them, as they sang, keeping back the tears, "Lord, Thou hast been our refuge, from one generation to another." Then they went to the grave, and there was a little distance to walk down the village street again. Once Ann spoke—

"I'm glad I came. I dreaded it, and I've never been to a funeral before. But I'm glad I came."

"So am I," said Finlay. "It makes you see——" He broke off. "It puts things in their right place. I



was silly to answer you as I did before. Of course I am lonely."

"I wish——" began Ann. But whatever she was about to say, she did not say it. She closed her lips upon what had been coming, and walked in silence to the grave-side.

Before she left Finlay had slipped away, and she was free to walk along the road towards the Red Grange, where she had arranged to meet Barrington, the week of his probation being over. He was waiting at the end of a green by-lane, and at first did not recognize her in her black clothes and the plain black hat. Then, as she came nearer, he saw her quite clearly between the springing hedgerows. He was startled by her pallor and her sadness, but she had never appeared to him so charming. Everything about her which had first attracted him was accentuated as she came along under the cold sky with the bleak freshness of a northern spring about her.

He waited until she was almost up to him, and then came out from the shelter of the hawthorn bush.

"Well, Ann?" he said. Then he added quickly, "Why, you're in black! You've been crying. What is it?"

"A neighbour in our terrace has died," said Ann, still grave and moved, not smiling at him. "I have just been to the funeral."

"Oh, you shouldn't have done that. No need at all," said Barrington. "Poor little girl, of course it has upset you!"

He kissed her, but she still seemed remote. She was not thinking of him, he could see that, nor of

herself, nor of the vital consequences of this interview, which she knew as well as he. For the moment she saw beyond her own concerns or his—beyond happiness—to the glorious something which she had sighted before, only for one second, when she faced death on the cliff with the sea creeping up to her.

And this unconcern, this pale face, this wide-eyed gravity, touched him most intimately. He had been undecided about his own course of action as he waited for Ann behind that hawthorn bush. Now he knew.

“Come and sit down, dear,” he said. “There’s a felled tree just over that hedge. I’ve a lot to tell you.”

He put his hand through her arm and led her through the gate into the field. Ann felt comforted and reassured by his grasp, and by his big, protecting presence so near to her. He sat down on the log and put his arm about her, speaking gently, cheerfully, without emotion. But he loved her better than he had thought it possible he could love any woman, all the more for the restraint he put upon himself.

At last she began to be interested in what he was saying. He and she again loomed as the centre of the universe and all the rest faded into a dim background, as before. She sat up, straightened her hat and smiled at him.

“I’m silly to have been so upset. But I was never at a funeral before. And the circumstances were so sad.”

“Never mind. We won’t talk about it any more now.” He paused. “Ann, I came home last night, you know. I’ve had a talk with my aunt.”



“ I expected you would have,” said Ann. “ Well, is she reconciled? ”

“ No—not exactly.”

He found it more difficult than he had expected in face of Ann’s confident air.

“ There is no real reason for her to object, you know,” said Ann. “ It’s only a case of her getting used to the idea.”

“ Yes. No. That is——” He jumped up. “ Ann,” he said, “ she’s more against it than ever. She won’t have it at any price.”

“ But that’s preposterous!” said Ann. “ If I had come out of the gutter——”

“ No. No,” interrupted Barrington. “ It has nothing to do with position or family or money or anything of that kind. That’s why——” He broke off again.

“ Then what on earth is it? ”

“ My aunt ”—he sat down again heavily—“ my aunt actually refuses her consent because there’s something wrong with our horoscope.”

“ What!” said Ann. “ Oh, you’re joking!”

“ I’m not,” groaned Barrington. “ I only wish I were! It seems she has the date and hour of your birth—she’d asked you for it some time ago. And, of course, she has mine. And she’s been going into our horoscopes all this week, and finds that marriage between us will be a disaster. All sorts of awful things would happen. So she has set her face dead against it, and you know how obstinate she can be.”

“ But in a matter like this!” said Ann. “ A thing that concerns all the happiness of your life and mine. She can’t be serious. She really can’t!”

"She can and is," said Barrington. "And that Bagshaw——! Oh, I wish to goodness I had him here with nobody looking on."

"Why, what has he to do with it?"

"He has everything to do with it, the beast. Everything. My aunt wavered a bit in the middle of the week, and wrote to tell me so. She's a kind old woman, when she hasn't got some bee in her bonnet. And so she consulted Bagshaw. She told him the greatness of the issues involved, and asked him if her conclusions were correct. She expressed herself ready to abide by his decision."

"And he?" Ann stood with her slim figure bent forward a little, the lambs frisking on the clear green of the field beyond her, an image of spring.

"He remembered that night in the hall of the Red Grange, I expect, and was glad to get his own back. Or he may have totted the blessed thing up in the same way as my aunt. I don't know. Anyway, he backs her up. He says that our marriage would mean a series of calamities."

"To think," said Ann, "that the tiresome old sea-lion should be able to do us so much harm! It seems to me in this world, that you never know who is going to be in a position to injure you. You ought to conciliate everybody."

"That would be worse. Then you'd have everybody jumping on you. But if you could never make fun of any one——" They gazed at each other ruefully, then began to laugh.

"Oh," said Ann, "how I should love to have him in a circus and make him catch balls on his nose for



a living! Oh, dear! I'll never liken any one to a dumb animal again. But what's to be done?"

"I don't know." He paused. "At least, I know what I'm ready to do. My aunt says that she will neither give me or leave me more than my present small allowance, if I marry you. And I think she means it. I've had experience of her mulish obstinacy on this point before. I remember the case of an old gardener whom she had employed for years."

"It's impossible that she should go on being so unreasonable," said Ann.

"She regards this horoscope business as being above all reason, so she won't listen to reason," said Barrington. "It's no use, Ann. We must take that as settled. The thing is——" He paused and put his arm about her. "My dear little girl, will you take me without the money, poor as I am?"

"Arthur, you know I will," said Ann, with real feeling. "I care for you more than anybody in the world. Of course, I'll stick to you, whatever happens."

There was a little silence then, only the birds chirping in the hedgerows and a lamb bleating across the clear green of the pasture.

"Anyway," said Barrington, lifting his face, "that's been the best minute of my life, so far. Nobody can take that from me."

"But, Arthur," said Ann, very rosy and smiling, in sweetest accord with the birds and lambs and springing grass, "surely it is a shame to throw away all that money. We shall be all right without it, but we shall be happier with it."

“Well, I’m not afraid. Are you?”

“No,” said Ann, looking down. Then she looked up at him from her seat on the log. “Yes, I am,” she said. “I’m afraid of being unhappy if I make you a poor man for life. Look what we should have if you kept in with your aunt—and to lose all that! Why, she’ll alter her will if we get married, and then it’s done. She won’t change again.”

“I’m ready to risk it, if you are,” he said. “She might come round. Anyway, I’m ready to risk it.” He bent down, close to her. “I say, Ann, I don’t want to wait for you. I can’t!”

“Only for a little while, Arthur,” said Ann. “Let us be—be disengaged for a few weeks and see. Things may change. You never know. Don’t let us throw away everything just for the sake of being married this summer.”

Barrington looked down at her, wondering at himself. To think that only a couple of hours ago he had almost contemplated giving up the engagement, and now the very mention of such a thing seemed intolerable. But he did see quite plainly the unpleasant consequences of being left out of his aunt’s will. They were neither of them fitted for genteel poverty, he felt that, and at last he said doubtfully—

“Well, for a few weeks, if you think it’ll do any good. I don’t. But you’ll stick to me, Ann? You won’t play fast and loose with me, really?”

“Of course not, you old goose,” said Ann, slipping her hand into his. “Arthur, it’s very nice to have anybody to care so much. You’re very good to me.”

"I want to be, dear," he said gravely enough. "I'm going to try to be."

But even after all that, there was a further detail which he had forgotten to mention, and as they parted he said suddenly—

"By Jove! I've only just remembered. You'll be hearing from my aunt to-day that she doesn't want you any more. She—she means to behave handsomely and all that, but she thinks you had better take another post."

Ann flushed crimson.

"Oh, does she? We'll see about that. Fancy! turning me out like a disgraced servant—as if I'd done something disgraceful!"

"No! No! You mustn't run away with that idea. It isn't that at all. She simply feels the situation would be embarrassing for all parties."

"I dare say it will," said Ann, "but I'm not going to be dismissed. Why, that would be——"

She did not say what it would be, and bade her lover farewell with a kiss and an indefinable remoteness behind the kiss, which made him more ardent in his pursuit of her than ever.

"Now," she said, "no more kisses until things are settled one way or another."

"Nonsense! Ridiculous! I won't submit to that!" he stormed.

"Our engagement is off," said Ann. "I'm not going to be so mean as to tell Mrs. Barrington that, and yet be meeting and kissing you on the sly. We're friends—good friends—until——"

"The end of May. I won't stand it a minute longer than the end of May," he insisted.

“Very well,” said Ann. “And at that time, if you still want me——”

“Ann!” He drew her to him.

“No. No,” said Ann, pulling away. “I mean it. I want to be straight.”

“Then the straight way would be to tell her bang out we mean to be married, and leave her to make the best or worst of it,” said Barrington.

But they neither of them yet wished to be quite as straight as all that, and they parted at last with the understanding that the engagement was to be broken off—until the end of May.

There remained, however, Mrs. Barrington herself to reckon with, and when Ann walked up the drive of the Red Grange next morning, she foresaw that the approaching interview would be very difficult, more difficult, in fact, than anything she had so far tackled in life.

She had, once more, as on the occasion of her first coming here, a sense of something strange about the place—a sense of being, in some odd and vague and quite inexplicable way, not wanted. She did not fancy any derisive chuckle from behind the bay-tree as she rounded the last box-edged flower bed, but she did feel as if such a sound might have been there. And when she passed again through the panelled hall, she felt, though she did not think, that the walls held secrets—suggestions—which some power might some time free them to give out.

It was through this odd atmosphere, this queer sense of everything being alive, that she came to the morning-room and greeted Mrs. Barrington with a non-committal “Good-morning.”

And, such was the atmosphere, she was not at all surprised to hear Mrs. Barrington say at once, without rising—

“Why have you come, Ann? It is no use. There is no use in fighting against destiny. If you do, you will bring terrible unhappiness upon yourself and upon those you love.”

Ann stood quite still, breathing rather fast. What had seemed idiotic in the green lane with Barrington became real here, and not foolish at all: she had to remind herself that it was so.

“I’ve not come to argue about that,” she said at last, quietly enough. “But I do not like being dismissed in this way, as if I were in disgrace.” She paused, flushing deeply, and added, “I won’t have it.”

Mrs. Barrington rose, green-brocaded, mountainous.

“I’m sorry to appear hard. I don’t want to be unkind, Ann. But the sooner it is over the better for you—and for all of us. And in that case it is better you should not come here any more.”

“Don’t you——” Ann paused, then went on again. “Haven’t you liked having me at all?”

Mrs. Barrington put her hand very kindly on Ann’s shoulder.

“My dear, you know I have. My life has been happier and easier in every way since you came. And I have not been well lately. I need you now, more than ever.”

“Then let me stay,” pleaded Ann. “I’ll give up my engagement to Arthur, I will indeed, if you’ll only let me stay on.”

“No. No. You’d be seeing him constantly. I must not be weak. I must do what I think right.”

"Or what Mr. Bagshaw thinks right."

The words were out before Ann could stop them, and she realized the magnitude of her mistake when she saw the dull purple flood Mrs. Barrington's face, as she replied with dignity—

"*And* what Mr. Bagshaw thinks right. Quite true."

So there it was; the sea-lion thrown down as a gage, and the two women glaring at each other over his, somehow, appropriate name.

"Well!" said Ann. "I'm not going at Mr. Bagshaw's bidding—not now I am sure you want me."

"But I don't want you—not now, that *I* am sure——"

"It's like this," interrupted Ann, pale and eager. "Either I stay, and don't meet Captain Barrington, excepting by accident, or I go and marry him as soon as he can get a licence. You can choose which you like."

"He never would," cried Mrs. Barrington. "He's too selfish. He never would."

"Ask him!" retorted Ann. "I know he would. Ask him!"

"No." She sat down heavily on her great chair. "I'll leave bad alone, Ann. But I shall never change. I can't change. It is beyond any power of mine. You must come, if you will. So far as that goes I am thankful to have you. But I shall never change. I would do anything—anything in the world—to save Arthur from certain unhappiness—and not only unhappiness—I must save him, if I can."

"From me?" said Ann.

Mrs. Barrington pressed her hand to her head; the

purple colour had faded, leaving her a yellowish white.

"From what you stand for," she said at last. "I can't explain. You wouldn't understand. But I shall never consent to this marriage."

Ann waited. Should she make an end of it all, take the risk, defy poverty, defy possible unhappiness, marry the man of her choice?

There was an intense, waiting silence in the room; but nothing happened.

Ann pushed back her dark hair with a hand that trembled a little, and said in a controlled voice—

"I see there's a pile of unanswered letters on the writing-table. Shall I go through them?"

"If you like," said Mrs. Barrington. Then in an anxious voice, "I haven't known which way to turn. I do hope I'm not getting helpless."

She was now no imposing mountain of brocade, but just a spent, old woman, huddled anyway in the recesses of her big chair. Ann felt very sorry for her, in spite of everything, with the detached pity of youth for grotesque middle-age.

"No, no," she said. "You'll be better soon. You have been worrying over the household accounts, I see."

But at that Mrs. Barrington gave in, and began to cry weakly, in a way quite unlike herself.

"I've been very much upset," she said. "I'm glad to have you back; I don't know what I should do without you now. And so long as there is no non-sense——"

Ann did not reply, but wrote on swiftly and surely, her face bent over her writing. There was no sound in the quiet room but the fall of a cinder now and

then, the scratching of her pen, and, at last, a snore from the big chair. She looked up then, and sat for a moment or two with her chin resting on her hands. The rude desperation with which she had fought Mrs. Barrington for permission to remain here seemed odious to her as she glanced back upon the scene just now. She could scarcely imagine herself speaking like that to an older woman who had, after all, been exceedingly kind to her.

But the idea of being sent back to her father's house had been intolerable.

No. Her thoughts, being candid, drew back from that conclusion. It was not that prospect which had urged her to fight. She had fought against leaving Wodenscar, as if she were fighting for her very life.

A louder snore, and Mrs. Barrington awoke.

"Finished, Ann?" she said, blinking sleepily.

"Yes, Mrs. Barrington," Ann replied, putting the papers together. "I can do the rest to-morrow."

"And we'll forget all this?"

"I hope you will," said Ann gravely.

CHAPTER VIII

A STRANGE DAY

SO things resumed their normal course at the Red Grange, outwardly; that is to say, beneath all the smoothness remained an undercurrent of tumultuous thoughts and feelings which was accentuated by the very calmness of the ordered, everyday life.

For the fit of weak crying, so unlike Mrs. Barrington, had been a sign of physical ill-health as well as of mental disturbance. She was gouty and disinclined to submit to Dr. Grey's orders; she was much too stout, and would take no means to reduce her weight: consequently, the strain she had undergone during the last few days told upon her, and she sank into a state of inert depression. But her will never wavered. It became, in fact, more obstinately resolute. She had a dim sort of comfort through all this unpleasantness that she was suffering for righteousness' sake.

And she had no Mr. Bagshaw to fall back upon, for he was abroad, moving from place to place, taking his spring holiday.

That a very handsome cheque from herself enabled him to do this more agreeably was a comfort to Mrs. Barrington, but no support. She pored dully over her books and horoscope charts nearly all day long, not going out at all, and there was naturally less intimate conversation between her and Ann than in

times past. But she had no desire whatever to disturb the existing arrangement now. She felt, in fact, that she would be physically unable to face the daily round without Ann's capable assistance.

Thus some days passed. At first Barrington tried to renew his old terms with Ann, but he saw that she was determined to stick to her side of the bargain, and finally he had to accept things as they were. A word occasionally—a smile—a look in passing—nothing more was to be had from Ann at present.

But no other behaviour could have so bound him to her. All the loves of his past years became as nothing in his estimation when he stood at a windy corner in a high blast from the south-west, waiting for her to smile at him as she went by. She was no longer just Ann Middleton, with the salt wind in her skirts and the aura of youth about her—she was the Unattainable—the thing which men seek through suffering and bitterest hardship, and die gloriously, not finding. For into almost every life, at some time, in some form or other however common, there enters the Quest of the Unattainable. There lies the inner secret of so many happenings which seem inexplicable; the hidden romance of all existence.

Certainly, Barrington lost weight at this period of his career, and was the better for it, while his slightly overblown, florid look gave place to a sharper eagerness of feature. It was possible, now, to conjecture that he had a mind and a soul behind those bold, gay eyes.

But one morning he broke the established rule and was waiting for Ann in the drive when she reached the Red Grange. He looked, even from the distance,



so disturbed and anxious that she hurried towards him, calling out—

“What’s the matter? Is anything wrong?”

“Hush!” he said, joining her and walking by her side. “Yes, but for goodness’ sake don’t let my aunt hear—her window may be open. Fact is, Ann, an awful thing has happened: she has got it firmly fixed in her head that she is going to die on Thursday next. Oh, it’s ludicrous, of course, and if she were not in such a poor state of health——”

“But what can make her think so?” said Ann. “How extraordinary!”

“Well, she’s been feeling seedy for some time, of course, and I expect that made her think of dying and so on. Then she began ferreting things out with the aid of those blessed books. She says she always knew this was her unlucky year, but she has only just found out the actual date. What on earth am I to do?”

“I don’t know,” said Ann, walking a few steps in silence. “At least I do know,” she added reluctantly; “you ought to send for Mr. Bagshaw. You’ll have to.”

“I’d thought of that, too,” said Barrington. “It goes against the grain, but I suppose I must. I’ll wire to every stopping-place along his route, then I can’t miss him. To think that I should be sending for Bagshaw!”

But as the days passed and no response came to the numerous telegrams, the one preoccupation of all those who loved Mrs. Barrington was the subject of Mr. Bagshaw. Would he arrive before Thursday or would he not?

Dr. Grey asked this question as he went out from a

long and serious talk with the invalid which had no effect on her mind whatever. The rector asked it as he put on his gloves in the hall after a most unsatisfactory interview. The butler asked it with respectful deprecation when he hovered over the dining-table arranging the decanters. Ladies of Mrs. Barrington's way of thinking wrote long and urgent letters, begging her, in metaphysical terms, to postpone all consideration of such an important event until Mr. Bagshaw's return from the continent.

But the obstinacy in Mrs. Barrington's character, already observed, held good here, and she adhered to her original opinion. If, however, this good lady was suffering from severe spiritual indigestion caused by taking in more strong mental food than she could assimilate, she remained at least absolutely sincere.

No one in the great house, when the morning of that terrible Thursday arrived, could feel anything but admiration for the way in which its mistress waited for death.

She rose at her usual time, put on a beautiful grey brocade, a gown never worn before, and came downstairs to the morning-room, where she caused her great chair to be turned round so that her large, placid face was towards the light from the window. For the first hour she asked to be left by herself; and God, who understands everything, alone knows what passed in the heart of the fat woman in the grey brocade gown who sat waiting so composedly for death.

Then she rang for her nephew and talked to him about the estate, and those whom he was to care for when she was gone. And at last she spoken of Ann.

"I suppose," she said, "that you will marry her when I am dead."

"You're not going to die," said Barrington, fiercely resentful of the whole situation, and especially of his own helplessness. "It's wicked to behave in this way. You're courting death."

"Never mind all that, Arthur," she replied. "The rector and Dr. Grey have said all there is to say on that subject, and I want to die at peace with all the world. Please answer my question."

"Why, yes," he said, "if you will have it. I shall marry her."

Mrs. Barrington smiled at him, and though her broad face was covered in folds of shapeless fat, it was a very beautiful smile.

"I knew," she said, "but I'm glad you told me. Fetch Ann here, please."

And when Ann came in, Mrs. Barrington took her hand and kissed her.

"My dear," she said, "you must believe me that I have nothing but good-will towards you personally. Arthur has just told me that he intends to marry you when I am gone. I can't prevent that. And I have not altered my will. I felt ill, and not equal to the thought such a thing required, and I put it off. And then it got too late. I had other things to think of. But my feeling is just the same as ever. And if I were going to live I should do everything in my power to prevent the marriage." At last, and for the first and last time her lip trembled. "My dear children—I only hope and pray you may escape what is written——"

here. I'll go my round and call again later in the day." He paused again and added solemnly, "Damn Bagshaw!"

"Only wish we had him here to damn," replied Barrington. "I say, doctor, she'd believe him, if we could only get him. And he wouldn't want her to die. She is too useful."

"And yet," said Dr. Grey, "there's an element of sincerity about Bagshaw, too, in spite of everything. I don't believe he'd be afraid to die, either. That's"—he glanced at the two young people before him, seeking for a word—"that's the inner core of all mysticism, however some mystics may cover it up with garbage of their own making. Mystics, of any country, of any creed, have conquered the fear of death. They see beyond death to life. They're not afraid to die."

Then he went away, and Ann and Barrington continued to walk on the green lawn in the sunshine. It was the most horrible day they had ever spent in their lives—the whole was at once magnificent and ludicrous—and yet they could do nothing.

At luncheon Ann could not eat, the food choked her. She was thrilled with admiration for the ridiculous, mistaken courage of the woman upstairs, and wanted in some way to share that strange fast and vigil. Barrington took only a slice of cold meat with some soda-water, and immediately afterwards they went out again to walk restlessly about the garden.

They talked a great deal, but each was conscious of something behind not said, and thus the time went

on towards sunset. Mrs. Barrington now refused to allow any one to enter her room, but she still answered when they knocked at the door—she still lived.

Of course she still lived, they assured themselves as they came away, half ashamed of the hold which her idea had gained upon their minds. But they both knew how feeble her voice sounded, and of that they did not speak.

Shortly afterwards Dr. Grey returned and insisted on the door being opened. He found Mrs. Barrington's pulse to be decidedly weaker, but she declined to take either food or medicine, and leaned back in her great chair with her eyes closed. Ann sat by the window ready to obey the doctor's orders should any be given, and she looked out at the sunset which hung like a danger signal over the house, reminding her of the afternoon when she first came to the Red Grange. It faded, and grey twilight followed on, accentuating the stillness. Then, almost with a sense of outrage, the watchers in that quiet room heard the sound of wheels outside, unsubdued voices in the hall, the sound of quick, heavy footsteps on the stairs. The door was thrown open and Mr. Bagshaw stood breathless on the threshold, his huge face flecked with sweat.

"My dear friend," he said, "there has been a mistake. A terrible mistake. You have tried to go beyond my teaching, and you have failed."

Mrs. Barrington turned towards Bagshaw a pale, bewildered face.

"But I was so certain," she said faintly. "How can I——"

Bagshaw came forward and took her hand between his own.

"Fine mistakes form the pavement of the road to heaven," he said grandly, though still slightly out of breath, and it was evident he had rehearsed this pronouncement in the train.

Ann rose in her place. She could not speak, but only stared at him through such a tumult of anger and relief that she did not know whether he had loomed upon her from that threshold as a destroyer or a guardian angel.

"Go!" he said, addressing the room vaguely, with his eyes on Mrs. Barrington and a loose wave of the hand in the direction of the rest. "We must talk together for a little."

"She must have some soup first," said Dr. Grey bluntly.

"Then send the soup, please," said Bagshaw. "And now, I must beg of you—— Mrs. Barrington seems to be very much exhausted, and I wish to explain her mistake to her as soon as possible in order that she may have peace of mind."

"I'll trust you to see that she has the soup," said Dr. Grey from the door, with some natural feeling of professional irritation.

"Oh, yes, you may trust me to see that any one in my charge takes proper nourishment," said Bagshaw.

Neither Ann nor Barrington had spoken, and it was a relief when Dr. Grey said, rather violently, as the door closed, "It is one of the many mysteries of life that nobody has strangled that chap with his own necktie. I suppose he is so fat and big they are afraid of tackling the remains."

Which, from the discreet Dr. Grey, showed how

this strange day and the strange ending to it, had indeed thrown everybody off their balance.

"Anyway, he turned up in the nick of time," said Barrington.

"He must have come very quickly," said Ann, because it was necessary to say something; but she and Barrington did not look at each other.

"Well," said Dr. Grey, "there's a prospective patient with a gig somewhere about your back yard, Barrington, I think. If you could just order him round I'll be off at once."

The two men went off together, while Ann gave personal directions about the soup before going out into the garden, where Barrington joined her.

"Well, that's all safely over!" he said, with a sort of assumed heartiness. "Now for a cigar and you. This is rather nice, Ann." He lit the cigar. "Wonderful how the old girl did face death, though, eh? Even though it was all rot."

"Yes, she was very brave," said Ann dully. "I don't think Dr. Grey liked Mr. Bagshaw's attitude, though, do you?"

"Well, nobody could like such ties, could they?" said Barrington, staring at the end of his cigar.

"You goose!" said Ann, trying to laugh. "I never mentioned his ties."

Then they walked down by the yew hedge, where it was already dusk, and spoke of the weather as they kissed each other, which was like eating cheese with strawberries. At last they ceased to either talk or kiss, and a queer sort of heavy silence fell between them.

"It's getting quite——" Ann began again, with an effort.

"I say," said Barrington abruptly, "it's no good! You're thinking what I'm thinking. Let's have it out, once for all. We can't go on like this. It's beastly—beastly——"

"I don't know what you mean," said Ann in a low tone.

"Oh, come now, Ann, you do. You must do. Why, we were both wishing the poor old woman dead all day, so that she couldn't cut us off with a shilling. We wanted her to die. I understood how those brutes feel who put people out of the way that have been good to them for their money. I never thought I should, but I did. It's beastly. Eh, Ann? It's beastly, isn't it?"

For Ann did not speak. She simply stared at him through the twilight. So this was the something which she had not found courage to bring forth. Now it stood naked, hideous, in front of her. She and Barrington were both murderers at heart, desiring the death of a defenceless woman, who had never given them anything but benefits, because she did not give them more.

"We did no harm," she said at last, speaking with difficulty. "We wouldn't have."

"Anyway, we can't go on like this. Eh, Ann? We simply can't!"

There was a pause before Ann answered—

"It seems a great deal to give up, Arthur. We should be so tremendously happy if we were rich, but you are not fitted to be a poor man married. We must have patience for just a little while longer."

“ Well, I don’t want to lose the money, of course,” said Barrington. “ But I hate being in such a false position.”

“ So do I,” said Ann. “ But I want to wait and see what effect to-day’s experiences have had upon your aunt. She has made one big mistake, and that may shake her faith in her own judgment. Do let us wait, Arthur.”

“ No. No. I can’t stand this sort of thing any longer.”

Ann looked thoughtfully at the perturbed face of her lover.

“ Why don’t you go away for a little while, until we see how things shape themselves? I feel sure your aunt will have become reconciled to our marriage by the time you come back if she is left alone, without being irritated by seeing us together. But how can you get away?”

“ Well, oddly enough, I had arranged to go for a yachting cruise in the Mediterranean with some friends next week, but I put it off because I didn’t want to leave you. I dare say they could still do with me.”

“ Wire and see, Arthur,” said Ann eagerly. “ I’m sure that will be the best.”

“ Well, I’m ready and willing to take the risk of losing the money, if you are, and I still think the best way would be to make a clean breast of it and hang the consequences!”

“ But I want you to wait,” pleaded Ann. “ I should hate to feel you were losing so much through me. It would spoil everything. Oh!” she turned, relieved for once by the prospect of an interruption. “ here’s Mr. Bagshaw! Then you’ll wire?”

He nodded and went forward hastily.

"My aunt all right?" he said.

"The dear lady," said Mr. Bagshaw, rather pompously, "is feeling much better, and will now have a little sleep."

For he was naturally feeling rather elated by the fact that Barrington, who had always been rather off-hand with him, should have been obliged to wire urgently all over Europe to secure his presence in this emergency. Telegrams, he knew now, had been sent to every stopping-place along his route of travel, and the thought caused him some legitimate pride.

"Your aunt will do now," he said, descending the last step. "Oh, yes. She will do now."

"I am profoundly grateful to you for coming in such haste as soon as the wire reached you," said Barrington. "I shall never forget it."

Bagshaw glanced for a moment from Barrington to Ann.

"Oh, no," he said cordially. "I am sure you will never forget it. And you, Miss Middleton, this must have been a day of suspense for you also, I am sure."

Then the butler came to announce that the belated dinner was on the table, and they went in at once.

It was an odd meal which those three partook of together, with something about it of the stilted, unreal atmosphere that prevails at a meal after a funeral. The usually immaculate cook had burned the entrée, and the butler, who was as dignified as dukes ought to be, served port with the soup, to his lasting shame, in the perturbation of his spirits. For Mrs. Barrington was greatly beloved by all her servants, and the

tension of those long hours had been very acute, especially towards evening.

And both Barrington and Ann knew, of course, that Bagshaw had given the casting vote against their marriage, while he was aware that they knew it, and yet all three talked civilly of the weather and foreign travel until the car came round to take Ann back to Sea-view Terrace.

She leaned back in the car with closed eyes as it swished smoothly down the long, dark road and through the village, and on reaching home she went at once to bed, though Mrs. Walker was bristling with questions.

But that night was the first absolutely sleepless night of her life. She felt weary beyond expression, and yet all night long she lay awake, for the very depths of her being had been disturbed. Twice during one month had fate seized her, like a kitten playing in the sunshine, and had forced her close to death. It had become a reality to her instead of a shadow. Even when she faced it herself on the cliff, it had been a shadow.

She cried a little, feeling very much alone; then, suddenly, she sat upright, remembering with a sharp, aching pity the man who slept on the other side of the wall. How had he been brought up against death in his youth!

She understood now, all his sadness and solitary brooding. The shock of it must have been almost insupportable.

She looked towards the wall in the dawn, wondering if he, too, were awake, and wishing she could comfort him.

CHAPTER IX

A STORM

IT was still quite early the next morning when Mrs. Walker came into Ann's room with an alert briskness of anticipation which could scarcely have been inspired by her message—

“Mrs. Barrington's compliments, and she is resting to-day. She will be glad to see you to-morrow.”

“Oh, thank you,” said Ann, giving no loophole for the escape of that bottled-up emotion which was apparent in her landlady's very apron-strings.

“I wonder,” continued Mrs. Walker at the window, “how the poor lady feels this morning?”

There was no response.

“After such a day as yesterday, too,” suggested Mrs. Walker.

Still Ann said nothing.

“Black north-easter blowing,” said Mrs. Walker, drawing up the blinds. “Oh, the poor things at sea!”

But though that remark forms a sort of litany joining all dwellers on this coast in prayer together when a gale blows from the east, Mrs. Walker was yet not consciously thinking of those at sea. And at last what she really meant to say burst those bonds of etiquette which unite, or separate, landlady and lodger. “You needn't think there is any secret about it! Everybody knows! Everybody always does know!

There's not many secrets in Wodenscar!" With that she gathered up the prowling Gertie and, head more than erect, marched to the door.

"What do you mean?" called Ann sharply.

"Oh, me! I mean nothing," said Mrs. Walker.

"I never supposed it was known to every one already," apologized Ann.

"You'll do well in the world," said Mrs. Walker, relenting, "if you just go on the principle that the things you really *want* people to know are the only ones they miss finding out."

Then she went away to cook the breakfast, while Ann dressed with an odd feeling, though the blinds were down, that the whole population of Wodenscar knew she wore blue ribbon on her underclothing. They already knew so much that it was almost dizzying to calculate how much more they might know.

The same sense of being drawn unwillingly into the centre of life in the little town pursued her as she walked out later in the morning in the teeth of the rising gale. The terrace looked sordid and desolate in the grey light, every window dulled with sea spray, and scraps of wallpaper flapping before the dusty wind. She glanced up at the house where Miss Linkskill had died, and saw the decorators at work there. The windows were all open to the strong, fresh wind, and the flowery papers made it gay enough, the landlord hoped, to banish the memory of a woman who had known how to live bravely there and die alone.

Ann paused for a moment, watching the men, and she became aware that the terrace was no longer just a row of little houses clinging to the edge of the world; it had become, without her knowledge, a place

of memories—a little place to which she would look back in the future from something so very different, and yet always with a kindness, with that little ache and thrill which belong to the places we were happy in when we were young.

And, now she thought of it, her earliest impression of the sea belonged here. It all came back as she stood watching the men, whistling, put a trellis of roses on the room where Miss Linskill died. She remembered most vividly the time in her early childhood when she lodged at the end house in the terrace—the sense of grey space and keen air, and grass-blades blowing in the wind.

But she forgot all about the past as the day went on, for reminiscence is as pale and unsubstantial a joy to the young as anticipation to the old, and life, that day, was enough for Ann. She felt an extraordinary joy of living, exhilarated by the north-easter which blew with increasing fury.

By ten o'clock at night it was like something alive, tearing through the grey streets of the little town—this old enemy, which men of Wodenscar had recognized all through the long, forgotten years, came thundering, thieving, certain to take away one day houses, gardens, the solemn church itself, the very memory of Wodenscar.

Perhaps it is this which makes a gale from the east at the spring tides in Wodenscar such a thrilling and vital thing. Men and women who belong to the place cannot just say, 'A gale is blowing,' and leave it at that. They have to feel something, too, if it be only a dim reflection of the feelings of others who have gone before.

In the roar and turmoil of this night, the very windows and doors rattled out, "Awake! Awake! The old enemy is near at hand!" People were obliged to keep vigil. Husbands grunted impatiently, and dropped a word about coast erosion and the Government, while wives wondered if the chimneys would smoke in the morning and so spoil the specklessness of spring-cleaned ceilings.

Then, just at the very darkest hour of the night, a bell clanged out above the clustered town, waking deep echoes everywhere. So those who had managed to fall asleep at last started up, exclaiming, "The lifeboat!" and saw an instant picture of the grey sea before Wodenscar, and upon it, staring out, faces of men in peril. Almost immediately followed a sound of doors banging, of people running, of voices shouting through the noise of the storm.

Ann heard the door of the next house as she sat up in bed, awakened suddenly from sleep. Finlay's light, even footstep reached her ears for a moment, grew fainter, ceased. She jumped out of bed, and was already half dressed, when Mrs. Walker's excited voice came across the landing, bidding her hasten. In five minutes they were running along with the rest, sorry for the poor men at sea, and yet with that sense of joyous excitement which comes from stirred pulses after a stagnant life. People pointed to the flare-light burning out at sea, and called in passing, "Poor fellows! They're going down in sight of home. It's a Yorkshire boat," and ran up and down like ants in face of that thundering, dark immensity.

Then came the familiar 'thug-thug-thug' of the

lifeboat carriage. The sound thrilled the people of Wodenscar as the sound of a bugle does some men, calling them to arms; they were out to fight the immemorial enemy.

Mrs. Walker, taut in all this turmoil as she would be in the Day of Judgment, grasped Ann's arm and shouted out triumphantly, ridiculously—

“Brave fellers! I'm glad I live at the sea-side.”

And Ann replied as ridiculously, with her heart in her throat—

“I'm glad, too. It's splendid! Splendid!”

She triumphed in she knew not what—all the glory of bravery, all the splendour of forlorn hopes everywhere—as she stood there, with her hat blowing away over the North Sea and her dark hair streaming in the wind.

It was thus that Barrington saw her when he turned round from the group of men with whom he was talking, and there is no doubt that he remembered to the end of his life how she looked then, with her arms raised to coil her hair and the wild sea behind her. He detected, then, the presence of something which he had not recognized in her until this moment—the capacity for tragedy.

But the thought passed almost before he had time to recognize it, and he could only call out a hearty greeting through the rattle and clang of the lifeboat carriage and the hoarse shouts of the men as they urged on the floundering horses.

Finlay ran before, calling to the crowd to make way, and Ann scarcely knew his voice, it was so alert and eager, so unlike his usual voice, which always seemed to be curbed by past restraint.

"We're a man short," he sang out excitedly to Barrington as he ran past.

"Yes, I'm going," said Barrington.

Finlay stopped short.

"No, no." He glanced at Ann, and added in an undertone, "It's a nasty night for a launch."

"No worse for me than you," said Barrington.

"Yes, it is. You've"—he glanced at Ann again—"you've got such a devil of a lot to lose, Barrington."

"Anyway, I'm going, my dear chap," said Barrington. "I'm chairman of the club, and I have the first right."

So Finlay walked away, but after a moment, with extraordinary persistence, he returned to Ann's other side.

"I want to go," he said. "You have plenty of other things you want to do, Barrington, and you can do 'em all. I want to do this. Let me go, won't you?"

They stood in the teeth of the gale, facing each other, with Ann between them, and there came an odd pause—one of those sudden pauses that seem to have an immense meaning which is yet not apparent. At last it was Barrington who said slowly, "Well, if that's how you feel—tell you what, we'll toss for it. No! Miss Middleton shall toss for us." He held out a penny. "That do?"

Ann took the penny and held it, looking anxiously from one to the other in the dim light.

"You mean it?" she said.

"Yes. Heads, I go. Tails, Finlay goes," answered Barrington.

She hesitated, made a movement as if she were

about to give back the coin, and then walked quickly towards a naphtha torch which had been fixed to a post on the sand. Barrington and Finlay followed, and Mrs. Walker stood a few steps away, glancing curiously at the three of them. The torch was sheltered by a high breakwater, but it blew fiercely in the wind, making strange lights and shadows on Ann's white face as she tossed the coin and peered down at it.

She stared out at them after she had seen it, saying nothing.

"Well," said Barrington, "which is it?"

"You!" she said.

"Hard luck," said Finlay.

But Ann leaned against the breakwater, with her lips parted, as if she were out of breath, and she did not speak another word until Barrington ran up in yellow overalls to bid her farewell.

"Good-bye," he said hurriedly. "It's ridiculous about the danger, you know. There is no danger. Good-bye."

She clung to his hand for a moment, and then let him go, but she still said nothing. He ran towards the lifeboat, crawled into it, and the excited horses began to pull into the water, rearing and plunging.

A cry! They were on the breakwater. No; a white sail ran up like a lost bird on the night—they were sailing over the breakers—they were out at last.

A long, deep murmur of relief went through the crowd; the fight with the enemy had started fair, and now all eyes were fixed on the flare-light out at sea. Could the men there hold out until help came? Would the flare be suddenly extinguished?

At first it was breathless watching, but the minutes joined to each other and made an hour—two hours. Nothing at all to be seen saving the distant flare on the wreck, the coming and going of the lighthouse beacon across the darkness, the white breakers, hungry for their prey.

Ann still stood with Mrs. Walker near the breakwater, but most of the women, shivering with cold and excitement, began to leave the shore and go home. Men talked to each other in low voices and looked anxiously towards the sea. Then suddenly the flare on the wreck vanished.

A low murmur ran through the crowd, very pitiful, as if in every heart a light of hope had died out, too. The women who remained began to cry. And yet Ann stood as she had been standing ever since Barrington went, not weeping at all, and making only brief answers to Mrs. Walker's cheerful remarks.

Another hour passed. Mrs. Walker had moved away in search of more responsive society, and sat at a little distance on the breakwater, white and tired, but jaunty still, with her veil carefully arranged over her nose.

It was the darkest hour of the night, just before dawn. The tide had risen, and the narrowing sand kept those who still waited close huddled together. Finlay stood where he could see Ann, but did not approach her.

At last she moved and went up to him. It was very dark now. They could scarcely see each other's faces, but her eyes gleamed out of a blurred greyness as she bent close to him and said—

“Has the boat been overturned?”

"No. There is no reason whatever to suppose such a thing," said Finlay quickly.

"May it have been?" urged Ann.

"I don't think so for one moment."

Ann clutched his sleeve.

"Listen," she said. "Do you hear that girl crying? Her sweetheart's in the boat."

"Ah!" He turned sharp round. After a pause he added, "Well, it will happen so."

There was a silence, and then Ann said in a voice he could scarcely catch—

"If he never comes back—if he's drowned—I've done it!"

"Nonsense!" said Finlay sharply. "All this waiting has unnerved you. You couldn't help the coin turning as it did."

Ann waited until a great wave had spent itself on the shore. Then she turned desperately to Finlay in the darkness filled with cold, salt spray.

"The coin never fell like that. It was you to go."

"And you—— Good God! what made you——" exclaimed Finlay. "You *wanted* him to go."

"No, no. I don't know—something made me——"

"You mean"—Finlay caught her arm—"you mean you'd rather Barrington went into danger than me? You mean that?"

"How could I possibly?" said Ann.

Finlay dropped her arm, and they stood apart, without speaking. After a time the sky grew slightly luminous with the approaching day, the forms of the waves emerged, the sun rose pale above the rim of the sea. And in that first gleam of dawn the watchers saw the lifeboat toiling home across the breakers.

A cheer went up from the tired people on the shore, and even those who had watched without much emotion all night were moved by the sound of that cheer.

Ann turned, weeping at last, to Finlay.

"He's safe! Thank God! He's safe!"

"Yes. Thank God!" said Finlay. "And now I mean to have an answer to my question. Why did you tell a lie about the tossing of that coin?"

They looked at each other's white faces in the grey light of the dawn over the sea, he seeking, she withholding and yet seeking, too. She drew a long breath, raised her head, and said stiffly, "I suppose it was an impulse. He had everything. It didn't seem fair. I must ask you to forget——"

"How can I?" he said. "It's not in a man's nature——"

"Then you must never let me see you remember," said Ann, with cold directness. "I shall hate you if you do. You saved my life. I dare say it was an impulse of gratitude."

"Perhaps so," said Finlay. "But there's one thing I must know. Are you going to marry Barrington?"

"You've no right——"

The lifeboat came closer; the crowd began to press between them to the edge of the sea.

"I'm going to know," he said.

"Yes," she answered. "Now are you satisfied?"

He stood still, gazing out to sea, and the dull, inward look he usually wore had returned to his face.

"Oh yes," he said. "Perfectly satisfied."

Then a group of excited boys rushing past them on the shingle caused her to stumble, so that involuntarily he held her close for a moment. "Ann!" he

whispered, in spite of himself. She moved back and at once he let her go; she stood in front of him, quite alone by the edge of the sea, as the lifeboat rode over the last breaker.

She could scarcely believe, as she stood there in the dawn waiting for Barrington, that she had so nearly thrown away all she wanted in life. It seemed incredible, like a dream of the night just over.

Even when Barrington came up to her, after helping to bring the rescued men ashore, the whole incident seemed unreal, impossible. But she held his hand with an obvious, breathless sense of thankfulness which must have satisfied any lover. Indeed, as he looked at Ann's white face in the dawn, and her tired eyes, words failed him, and he could only blurt out like any schoolboy—

“Then you're pleased to see me back?”

“Oh, I'm thankful—thankful!”

She could say no more than that; she could only hold fast to what she had so nearly thrown away upon an incredible impulse which she could not understand.

“Poor little girl,” said Barrington. “I ought to have thought of the strain upon you. I ought to have let Finlay go. But—somehow I couldn't!”

“It has been a dreadful night,” said Ann. “We all feared the boat was lost.”

“There was never any real danger, excepting for a minute or two when we were close to the wreck,” he replied. Then other people drew near, so that they became the centre of a group, all exclaiming and asking questions.

“Glad to see you safe back, captain!” called out

Mrs. Walker, jaunty still, in spite of the long night's watching.

"Captain Barrington," urged a tall, thin lady, pressing forward, "would you tell us what you thought of during those moments when you were in danger of drowning? I am always so anxious to obtain first-hand impressions."

"I thought about the salt water in my eyes," said Barrington. "That's all."

"Always is all," said Mrs. Walker, turning upon the disappointed lady. "If you want to think about another world you'd best do it before you're just off there. My husband is a sailor, and he once was on a raft for four days, and they ate the dog, and then he became insensible. And what did he think? He wished he'd had more dog. That would have been his last thought if he had died then."

"Ha! ha!" laughed Barrington, thankful to Mrs. Walker for having relieved the tension. "Well, it's time Miss Middleton went home to bed. She looks very tired. Good-night—no, good-morning!"

So Ann shook hands with him in the midst of a little crowd of people, and walked slowly across the sands to the parade, which gleamed empty and dismal in the early morning light.

She realized now that she was more utterly spent than she had ever been in her life before, and Mrs. Walker, noticing her fatigue, tried to hearten her up by a flow of inconsequent remarks as they trudged along.

"Captain Barrington never noticed I was tired, too. Wonderful thing that a man's afraid a breath will blow you over at twenty, and at forty you may be out

in a hurricane with him only saying, 'Don't make a fuss, and hold your hat on tight.' That's life. But you never know anything about life until you get to it, and then it doesn't matter." She paused, glancing at Ann's irresponsive countenance, and added carelessly, "I couldn't help thinking in the night that it would have been better for poor Mr. Finlay to get drowned than the captain. There's nobody to miss Mr. Finlay very much, is there?"

Two waves advanced, broke, receded, before Ann replied. Then she only said—

"No, I suppose not!"

CHAPTER X

FOOTSTEPS

THE terrace glistened once more in its spring freshness with nothing save a few blackened shoots in the gardens remaining to mark the passage of the storm. Only, to Ann, it had made a tremendous difference. She looked once more through clear windows, but for her the spray left from the storm still confused the view—caused it to suffer a sea-change into something magically uncertain.

Yet, as she at this moment sat facing Mrs. Barrington across the tea-table in her own sitting-room, she had never, in a way, felt more certain of her future. For this formal visit conveyed something which her guest was even now endeavouring to put into words.

“Do have a little more tea-cake, Mrs. Walker’s cakes are so good,” said Ann, tactfully forbearing to assist.

Mrs. Barrington took a piece, but not because she wanted it. The window was open, and as the two ladies inside listened to two ladies of Wodenscar talking outside, voices, floating in, accentuated the want of conversation at the tea-table.

“Are you letting this year?” asked the first speaker in a politely artificial tone; just as in some places one may say, “Are you going to town this season?” And the other replied—

"Oh, yes! My husband rather objects; but I do so dislike Wodenscar in August."

Then Mrs. Barrington found words at last, to approach, at any rate, the fringe of her subject.

"Why on earth can't they say plainly they want the money?" she exclaimed, with heavy irritability. "There is nothing unusual in that. The whole world is out for money. Young people want it, and old people——" She stopped short.

"Old people?" said Ann.

"They try to buy love with it, and generally fail," said Mrs. Barrington.

Ann looked across at the elder woman, who sat brooding, monumental, in deep purple brocade, over the cooling tea-cake, and felt a quick, sudden sympathy with her.

"You think that because of the letter you had from Captain Barrington this morning," she said quietly. "I had one, too. He told me he was writing to you. But it does not mean that he cares less for you than he has always done."

"I suppose not," said Mrs. Barrington, taking a foreign envelope from her bag. "Perhaps I have only just realized how little he ever did care."

"Just because he won't give me up when you ask him?" asked Ann.

"Oh, well!" Mrs. Barrington arose ponderously and went to the mantelpiece where the red and yellow paper roses made a bizarre background for her huge figure. She seemed less certain here than Ann had ever seen her before; her immense aplomb had deserted her in these unfamiliar surroundings, and her big, heavy-featured face was flushed and disturbed.

“Arthur”—Ann brought out the name defiantly—
“Arthur has only told you the truth.”

“But you did not mean him to tell it yet,” said Mrs. Barrington quickly. “I can quite see that he is madly in love with you—beyond, now, all thought of consequences. During the long days, away with those men on the yacht, with time to think, and all the beauty of the Mediterranean in spring—oh! it’s comprehensible!” She smiled ruefully at Ann. “You might not think it, but I was in love once, and greatly beloved.”

“I can quite——” began Ann.

“No!” said Mrs. Barrington. “You can’t. Nothing is so incomprehensible to a slim young girl as the fact that a fat old woman once felt as she does. But all this brings us no nearer.”

She stood, immense in that little place, again brooding uncertainly. “Mr. Bagshaw——” she began at last.

“Oh, Mr. Bagshaw!” exclaimed Ann involuntarily.

“He is a great and good man,” said Mrs. Barrington. “And he still feels I ought to follow the guiding of the stars. They are there for our guidance. But I have done my best. I tried to keep you and Arthur apart because I thought it was for the happiness of you both.”

“But if we love each other?” said Ann.

Mrs. Barrington looked down at the table and sighed.

“I wish I could feel sure about it,” she said. “My dear, I want you to be happy. But there is something—I can’t feel sure.”

Ann looked out of the window and said nothing.

The first visitors of the season went boisterously from the house on the right, calling to each other. The little room seemed filled with a dreary quiet.

"I shall stick to Arthur," said Ann at last, "if you choose to leave him without a penny."

Mrs. Barrington turned quickly, then her face grew shadowed and her small eyes focussed and keen.

"It's come to that now, has it?" she said. Then she sighed again. "I wish, my dear, you'd said that weeks ago."

"You surely would not wish me to have injured Arthur's prospects——" began Ann hastily.

"No. No, I suppose not."

They were again at a deadlock. The things waiting at the back of it all to be said, could not yet force themselves into words. But in the end this illuminating sentence sprang forth from Mrs. Barrington's lips—

"I can't forget that I made one great mistake."

There was the key to all this uncertainty. This unusual woman had not been afraid to face death, but she had been greatly unnerved by the anti-climax, far more shaken in mind and body than she herself realized.

"You mean that you might have made another mistake about us?" said Ann.

"No. No. I don't think that is possible. I have Mr. Bagshaw's confirmation. But still——"

Her big-featured face against the paper roses was almost pathetic as she waited, looking across at Ann.

Then a second of those illuminating sentences started out of all the irrelevance and shone clear.

"You don't feel sure enough to rob a man of his

inheritance? To make his wife feel all her life that she has done him an injury?" said Ann.

"I don't know," said Mrs. Barrington. "I don't know what it is. Anyway, I am going to give my consent. I won't hold out any longer. This letter"—she tapped it with a shaking finger—"in this letter Arthur tells me that you have decided to marry when he returns, whether I approve or not. I can't prevent it. But I wish"—she paused and faced Ann again—"I wish I liked it."

"I scarcely see, excepting that I have no money, why you should so object——" Ann began stiffly.

"It is not that," interrupted Mrs. Barrington, returning to her seat by the table and speaking in a more usual, composed tone. "I cannot expect you to understand, but there is nothing *personal* to you at all in my objection, Ann. I only want Arthur to be happy. And I have a strong feeling that certain forces are against your marriage which will prevent your being at your highest together."

"It's not my fault that you are psychic and have those sort of feelings," said Ann. "I am very sorry."

"Well, perhaps——" Mrs. Barrington checked herself with a sigh, and went on hurriedly, "However, we will put all that on one side now, and directly Arthur returns he will see your father. I will provide a suitable allowance, and you can be married as soon as you choose." She rose, for at the long last she had managed to say what she had been unable to say until that moment, and she wanted to go home at once to her own chair in her own quiet room.

"You are very kind," murmured Ann, unable, for

the life of her, to bring forth anything more gracious or spontaneous.

But Mrs. Barrington seemed not at all displeased with the baldness of this acceptance; in fact, she looked more affectionately at Ann than she had done since the beginning of the interview.

"My dear, I mean to be kind. I think you will find that out," she said.

Then she kissed Ann, and they walked together to the end of the terrace where the car waited in the sunshine. Just before starting Mrs. Barrington leaned down and whispered, with a glance at the chauffeur, "What about writing to your people? I suppose you will write to-night?"

"I suppose so," agreed Ann. Then suddenly something uncontrolled rose within her and spoke, as it were, for her, "No, I will wait until Arthur returns."

"But your sister is coming to you for Easter. You must tell her. And your father should be the first," objected Mrs. Barrington.

"I shall see. I don't know. Anyway, I would rather wait, please," said Ann, with an earnestness which surprised herself.

"Oh, very well," said Mrs. Barrington. "I suppose it is natural you should want Arthur's support at such a time." Then she leaned back with a sigh of immense relief, saying "Home!" in a voice which made it sound like a *Nunc Dimittis*. The unpleasant interview which she had been putting off and vaguely dreading for days, had turned out to be less unpleasant than she had feared, and she realized once more, as she swept along the budding lanes, how

largely the unpleasant side of life is made up of fear.

Ann, meanwhile, walked back down the terrace. A visitor, who would have scorned to raise her voice in her own street at home beyond a decent murmur, was here yelling jovially from a top window to a boy below, some intimate instructions about changing his best breeches. Women moved alertly to the door at the lightest touch of the bell in the hope of Easter holiday-makers. Curtains were white, linoleum gleaming, daffodils a-blow in the little gardens, clean 'Apartments' or 'To Let' cards in nearly every window—Easter coming to Wodenscar.

There was something so cheery about it all that Ann, drawing in long breaths of the salt air as she went along, felt her own outlook to be fresher and clearer than it had been during that long, hot talk with Mrs. Barrington; even the misty enchantment left by the storm seemed to clear away as she opened and re-read Barrington's last letter. Indeed, it was charming, ardent, everything a girl could wish in a letter from her lover, and Ann felt proud as she read it, to think that the man who had written it belonged to her. All uncertainties vanished in the sunshine of his delightful words, as if some of the glow and glory of the blue Mediterranean at Easter-time had been hidden in them.

She, like Mrs. Barrington, was immensely relieved to know that the inevitable settling-up was over at last. The fact that she had seen it coming did not take away from this cessation of strain now it was all over, and her imagination began to run of itself about the pleasant fields which Barrington's letter and his aunt's words had opened out before it.

She ate a boiled egg for her supper with the beautiful dining-room of the Red Grange before her eyes, and when she retired, the prospect of the oak staircase was much more plainly before her than the actual, blue linoleum of Mrs. Walker's narrow steps.

She lay down, no longer obliged to remind herself of the pleasure she had always found in Barrington's society, for she saw him with her mind's eye as plainly now as she had seen the dining-room and the staircase of the Red Grange. There his image smiled out at her, gay, debonair, devoted, the lover of whom she had dreamed during those years of sugary novel reading at home when her taste made her avoid anything 'unpleasant.'

But in spite of these happy reflections, her recently formed habit of lying awake until late at night refused to be broken; sleep would not come, though she wooed it with thoughts of white satin and real lace and diamonds.

Then, faintly, far-off, she fancied there was the beginning of that sound for which something in her would keep vigil. Nervousness, she called it; an inability to sleep until every one in the terrace seemed also to be sleeping.

She sat up, listening—and another, most hideous noise broke the stillness. It was Gertie caterwauling outside in the shadowy darkness, like a demon-cat in a picture. Ann waited, the discordant noise grating on her tense nerves, until she remembered that Mrs. Walker slept at the back and could not hear; then she ran down in her dressing-gown to let the cat into the house.

The moment she opened the door Gertie ceased

caterwauling and slipped past her into the house. Then, swift on the silence, came that other sound for which almost unconsciously she had been waiting—Finlay's light, even step upon the pavement of the terrace.

There was no light in the house, and she was not afraid of being seen on such a dark night in the dark passage; so she stood there, a little way from the open doorway, her head forward, her eyes bright and eager. All that was virginal and elusive in her came out then in the exquisite attitude of her slim figure as she waited—and yet she was aflame.

Suddenly a strong light from without flashed on to her, illuminating her. For one second she kept her pose, arrested by surprise; Finlay, also, remained absolutely motionless, his finger pressed on the button of his electric torch. Then he let it go, and in the dark moment that followed, and the absolute stillness of the night, two people could be heard to sigh together—the sigh which comes at the end of something wonderful.

The woman is always the one to break that silence which comes after such a sigh, because long ages have taught her its sweetness and danger; so it was Ann who said, with a nervous thrill in her voice and a reliance on the bathos of her words—

“I was only letting Gertie in. You startled me.”

“I'm sorry,” said Finlay, rather stiffly, walking up his own path. “I always carry that thing in my pocket in case I get lost in crossing the fields at night. I take my exercise at night, you know.”

“You and Gertie are both shockingly late. You

always are," said Ann, successfully trying to speak lightly.

He leaned over the railings, speaking cautiously. "Do I wake you? If so, I will come back earlier."

"Oh no, I wouldn't have you do that," murmured Ann.

"I'd"—he paused—"I'd do more than that——"

She stood a moment, knowing she ought to go and yet not going, enchained by the note in his voice, that which love gives to those who are capable of a high passion. Then, without a word, she closed the door softly.

"I make all allowances," said Mrs. Walker, emerging stern and trim in a narrow white nightgown at the stair head. "I know what it is to be a favourite with the fellers. But if Gertie and Mr. Finlay come home together again, I must ask you to leave them *both* outside. No one has ever breathed a word against this house, and I don't intend they should."

"Surely you don't think I did it on purpose?" exclaimed Ann.

"Me!" said Mrs. Walker, turning indignantly towards her own room. "I think nothing. But when a woman calls her very tom-cat by a female name for fear of misunderstandings when people hear her shout out 'Sam,' it is hard to have a young lady in the house that impropriety seems to follow. I don't say it's your fault, but there it is. I know only two kinds of marrying girls," continued Mrs. Walker, with her door-handle in her hand, "one wants a husband to take care of her, and the other wants to take care of

her husband. You must excuse me saying you belong to the first lot."

Then she closed her door, not too softly, and Ann went back to bed.

She shivered as she burrowed under the warm bed-clothes, not from cold but from a vague fear that fate would one day take hold of her and force her to look plainly at love, as she had been forced to look at death.

Peace, almost visible, brooded over the little terrace by the sea. Soon Ann fell asleep. Only Finlay remained awake until the morning, thinking of the girl on the other side of the wall, and cursing his lost chances as he had never done before, even in the first days of his imprisonment. If he had been anything of a coward he would have taken the short way out of life's difficulties on that night.

CHAPTER XI

SISTERS

BUT when these two young people went down the terrace next morning, he to his brickyard, and she to her secretarial work at the Red Grange, it was impossible for the most acute observer to see that anything unusual had happened to either of them.

And this necessity for appearing the same under any stress of private grief is so instinctive that no one thinks about it; yet it does not fail to produce a feeling of intense loneliness in every one who passes through the experience, even when the sufferer is most keenly anxious to hide any sign of unhappiness.

Ann, therefore, felt very thankful that her stepsister was coming later in the day to stay during the Easter holidays. She longed to get into touch once more with the familiar thoughts and ways she had known all her life, being homesick, not so much for the brick house or her too-engrossed father, as for the old, direct frame of mind when she was troubled by no side issues.

During the morning she went through the usual routine of reading, writing, and supervizing those various household affairs at the Red Grange which had lately become her province. But neither Mrs. Barrington nor Ann made any reference to the interview of the previous afternoon, and only once was there even an indirect allusion to the subject then spoken of.

This occurred as the two ladies were choosing new covers for the drawing-room furniture, when, on Ann's taking up the bundle of patterns, Mrs. Barrington suddenly went back to her great chair and closed the discussion.

"After all," she said, "good brocade lasts a lifetime—it will matter more to you than to me, Ann. Choose which you like best."

Ann, however, replied that there were none to her taste; they would send for more patterns; and immediately after lunch the car was ordered round to take her to the railway station, to meet her sister.

As the two girls stood together on the platform, it seemed impossible they should be in any way related. Margaret was rather stout, like her mother, with a high colour, light brown hair, and a beautiful little mouth which was an index to her character. She was obviously, at the first glance, of those truly good people who are sent into the world to make other people improve themselves.

Already, on the threshold of Mrs. Walker's flowery bower, she called it a dust-trap, and when tea was brought in she asked if the milk had been boiled.

"You don't mind?" she said to Ann; "but as I am about to be a hospital nurse, I may as well begin as I mean to go on. I have to start my training in Trentford, because I am not old enough for a London hospital. It was really those Ambulance Classes which put the idea into my mind. Some of us were allowed to go to the hospital for so many hours a day for a month, and that did it. I actually cut the toe and finger nails of twelve men the very first day. One of them said I was a born nurse."

Ann looked across at her sister and saw in her a person whom she did not know, because she had never penetrated for one moment beneath that family armour which so many brothers and sisters always wear when they are in company with each other.

"Do you want to be a hospital nurse?" she said at last. "Or is it that you just feel the other girls are growing up, and you must do something? Tell me truly, Margaret, for there may be other chances—don't do anything in a hurry."

"Of course I am dying to be a nurse," said Margaret. "But what chances could you give me?" She laughed cheerfully and drew a bolt at random. "You don't mean to tell me that you are going to marry Mrs. Barrington's heir, do you?"

"No," said Ann, "I don't."

"Oh!" Margaret fell back upon the tea-cake. "Well, I heard he had been paying you attention, but if you are not really and truly engaged, there's nothing in it. Men always did like talking to you, Ann, but that was as far as it went, wasn't it?"

"I'm afraid it was," said Ann, realizing the mixed joy of family reminiscences, in that relatives not only remember what one wants to remember, but also what one wants to forget.

However, she was still truly glad to have a part of her own uncomplicated life there with her, and next morning when the two girls ate those thick, square hot cross buns which are now only to be found in Yorkshire, the spicy fragrance of them brought back to her all the Good Fridays of her childhood, the queer sense of solemn holiday, the pale sun and the dusty wind blowing down long grey streets.

On the following day, being Saturday, the sisters were to have taken tea with Mrs. Barrington, but she felt unwell and put them off, sending a great basket of flowers with her love.

Easter Day was pitilessly wet, but Mrs. Walker brought in the letters with an air of buoyant newness which was not solely due to her new spring dress, but had most to do with a fine feeling she had that life was starting fresh again and was certain to be jolly.

She ushered in, in her new light grey costume and her shining shoes, the season of carnival in Wodenscar, when the sands are full of people, and pierrots sing morning, afternoon and night, and the expanse of drab, gleaming sea is always decorated by women and children in every colour of the rainbow. The old Wodenscar stayed awake now only in winter-time, and had already nodded off to sleep until the autumn. It was young Wodenscar which rose joyously on the morning of Easter Bank Holiday, to the sound of a roundabout on the shore near the station blaring out 'Dolly Grey,' and the scream of trip trains coming in.

The rain had ceased, though the weather remained grey, with a light wind blowing off the land, so the girls provided themselves with luncheon in a small basket and set forth upon a long tramp by the sea.

As they went down the terrace, large gentlemen visitors in loose tweeds waited in the little gardens for wives and children, conscious of good food just eaten and better still to come, lavish in coppers, ready to 'treat' to anything, with a splendour and jollity about them which created the atmosphere of festival as the sun makes the day.

"Fine morning!" called one florid gentleman to the

girls when they went by, just because he wanted some expression for that abounding sense of holiday.

So the girls called back, "Yes, lovely morning!" as they must have done, whatever the weather, rather than dim any of the brightness. And when they reached the shore, they found it crowded with girls and women in clothes that were too thin for that dull day and keen air. Flowery hats fluttered crudely above town faces either red-nosed with the cold or white and pinched, but the wearers were happy because they felt that they were looking their best. Happiest of all were those who posed before a photographer, with a wooden or jocular young man; for the male retains his feudal place on a Bank Holiday at Wodenscar.

Ann began to lose sight of her own troubles as she went along the shore, scarcely-conscious of the ground beneath her feet. She was still so young that the exhilaration of the wide sea, and the keen air, and so many people happy, made an atmosphere in which life itself seemed a holiday.

After some distance, however, the holiday-makers grew fewer; the flat sand edging the almost waveless sea now stretched before them, blank and untrodden. They sat down beneath the shadow of an old breakwater to eat their lunch, lightly conscious of their new relationship to each other, of having cemented those ties which almost always require cementing when childhood is past, if they are to be of any real use.

After a while, as they munched, they saw a lonely speck against the expanse of brownish-grey and greyish-brown. It grew nearer and larger; it was a man walking swiftly and lightly.

"Doesn't look like a tripper," said Margaret idly.

"No. It is a Mr. Finlay who lives next door. He always walks alone," said Ann.

"Not—that Finlay!" exclaimed Margaret.

Ann nodded.

"Well," said Margaret, eyeing the lonely figure, "he really does look like a sort of Cain, going along there, doesn't he? Do you know him?"

"Yes," said Ann.

"Well, I'm glad he is going past without looking at us. That does show a nice feeling," said Margaret, eating another sandwich. "Why!"—as Ann started up—"what's the matter now?"

"I'm going to call out to him," said Ann. Then her voice rang clear across the sand, "Mr. Finlay! Mr. Finlay!"

He stopped short, then came slowly towards them.

"Whatever made you do that?" said Margaret hastily. "He would evidently rather not be bothered."

"You said yourself he looked so lonely," murmured Ann in a low voice as he approached. "Oh, Mr. Finlay, Mrs. Walker gave us too much lunch and we don't know what to do with it. Please help us to finish the rest. By the way, this is my sister Margaret.

"Delightful day, isn't it?" said Margaret, wondering a little at Ann's jerkiness, but charitably determined to be 'nice,' as the man was there. "Rather a cold wind, though."

He responded suitably, and was about to walk on, when Ann, bending forward a little, smiled at him and said, with a sort of playful earnestness, "Don't spoil our holiday. It has all been so jolly to-day;



and when you are feeling jolly and ask somebody to come and play with you and they won't, it leaves you with such a horrid blank feeling, doesn't it?"

"But if Mr. Finlay really would rather not——" interposed Margaret, sitting up rather straight on the sand.

Finlay stood very erect, looking at Margaret, his clear features quite impassive.

"You want me to stay?" he said at last.

"Yes," said Ann.

His eyes shone as if a flame had suddenly been lighted behind them.

"All right," he said. "I'll—take a holiday!"

Margaret glanced at them, thinking that he was 'queer' and Ann stupidly insistent; then she held out the bread-and-butter.

At first he was rather quiet, but in responding to the girls' light chatter he seemed to awake in himself a gaiety of spirit of which they would not have imagined him capable. He and Ann felt like captives released, who have not been in bondage too long to become deadened to the sense of freedom.

And if their shackles were of their own making, the casting of them loose caused all the more a lessening of strain, a glorious lightness, which enabled them to find a baby crab on the shore exceedingly amusing, and to laugh until the sea-gulls screamed an answer because the salt-paper burst and destroyed the last raspberry puff.

Still, it is necessary to be very happy or very miserable, or very much in love, to be really, wholeheartedly silly, and Margaret who stood outside all those estates was a little annoyed by the foolishness

of her companions. She watched Ann, balanced precariously on the end of the old breakwater, and called rather impatiently, "Are you ready to go home?"

Ann turned, swaying and then righting herself, poised in an exquisite attitude against the calm expanse of sea and sky. She was, as she stood there, laughing back at them, an image of springing girlhood. And as they watched, a most lovely thing happened. The bay behind her grew faintly luminous—the pale light strengthened, spread, until the whole of the grey water took on a most delicate glamour, neither of silver nor gold, but the colour of the sea at such a moment in Wodenscar.

The glow died out again, sea and sky were dull grey as before.

Finlay drew a long breath and turned to Margaret.

"She ought to have a radiant life," he said involuntarily.

"Oh, I dare say she will have," said Margaret, and she glanced again at her sister. "Ann, are you coming?"

"Coming!" called Ann gaily, running along the breakwater.

"Ann doesn't know what fear is," said Margaret.

"Fear!" echoed Finlay absently. "There are so many sorts of fear."

Then they all three went along the sands together, talking, to the light tune set by Ann, of any trivial thing that came uppermost.

"I once knew," said Margaret, "a man who always thought out subjects for conversation while he was dressing in the morning."

“The sort of man who would propose by letter and send a wreath of artificial flowers to his mother’s grave,” added Finlay.

“I call it an excellent idea,” said Margaret.

“Well, so it is, after all,” said Ann. “I think I shall begin to-morrow. Let us see—stockings on—feats of eminent pedestrians——”

“Oh!” cried Margaret.

“I didn’t mean a pun,” said Ann. “I’m quite serious. Hair done—baldness—no professional musician ever bald—music cure suggested.”

“Ha! Ha!” laughed Finlay. “Fancy all the fat old Stock Exchange magnates fiddling away for dear life in a hair promoting establishment. What fun!”

“Now, your turn next, Margaret,” said Ann.

But Margaret, quite naturally, had had enough of this.

“How still the sea is!” she said. “It can’t be calmer on the Mediterranean, can it? I wonder how Captain Barrington is getting on!”

There was a moment’s pause. All unknowing, Margaret had destroyed a lovely iridescent bubble blown by time from the frothy edge of the sea; silently it vanished into nothingness.

At last Finlay said, in a dull, flat tone—

“The Mediterranean is not in the least like this.”

“Were you ever there?” queried Ann mechanically.

And after that they walked home in a mood very well suited to Margaret’s taste, discoursing of the Naples Aquarium, and the adaptable habits of soles.

The subject chanced to be one in which Finlay had been interested, and he knew so much about it that Margaret was moved to say, when the girls were alone

at their tea-table, that she considered him highly intelligent.

"Pity," she remarked, "that he has placed himself in such a terrible position. No nice girl will ever want to marry him."

"He won't want to marry," said Ann, with an air of closing the subject. "Here, you can't have fish from the Mediterranean, but you can have chocolates. These came from Captain Barrington yesterday. Take some."

"I don't know," said Margaret. "Are those nut ones? I always choose the nut ones because they are very sustaining as well as nice to eat. But I don't know about Mr. Finlay not marrying. Of course, he ought not, as things are, to drag any girl into his shadowed existence—but—I rather thought, Ann, that he seemed to have the makings in him of a lady's man. You would never imagine it to look at him, of course, but I did think I detected symptoms."

"Those strawberry ones are the best," said Ann, again holding out the box.

"But about Mr. Finlay," persisted Margaret.

"You seem to be very much interested in Mr. Finlay," said Ann.

"I am," said Margaret. "If only I were going to be here longer I feel I might do something with him. I have always liked working amongst really serious cases. Now, if you remember, when that man came out of prison after stealing a piece of beef from our butcher's, I went to see him at once, and got father to find him a job."

"I don't think really you can compare Mr. Finlay—" said Ann.

"Oh," said Margaret, picking among the chocolates, "I know all that. But it's not the *real* wrong things people never get over, it's the wrong, wrong things, if you know what I mean." Then she picked out what looked like a large violet sweet and gave a little scream. "Ann! What's this?"

"Which?" said Ann.

"This! It's velvet! And something inside!"

"No—no, it can't be," said Ann.

"Ann, I know a ring-case when I see one, even if it is in the shape of an Easter egg," retorted Margaret.

"Well"—Ann looked down, ready to spring open the catch of the little velvet egg—"you've found it. I missed it somehow. Can you keep a secret, Margaret?"

"You know I can."

"Yes. I remember you always could," said Ann. But she still paused with her finger on the spring.

"Well? Well?" urged Margaret, as thrilled, in spite of all her common sense, as any other girl of twenty at the near sight of romance.

Then Ann lifted her head with a jerk and pressed the spring.

"There!" she said.

Immediately the beautiful stones flashed out as if glad to convey their message.

"There, that's all right, anyway!" said Ann, and for a few moments the girls remained silent, then a mist clouded Margaret's keen eyes and she went round the table.

"Ann, I'm so glad! I'm so glad!" she said, and kissed her sister on the cheek.

"Dear old Marge," said Ann, holding her tight.

But directly the emotional moment was over they drew apart, and Margaret said shakily—

“Poor old father—after all his hard work—how glad he’ll be! And those hateful girls who used to say you ran after the vicar! What a sell for them! Captain Barrington! Ann, I can’t believe it. And yet I do. No man would send a girl an engagement ring if he did not want to marry her. *Are* you quite certain this time, Ann?”

Ann looked gravely at her sister over the ring, which was too large for the slim finger on which she had placed it.

“I’m quite certain that he wants to marry me, Margaret, and that I am going to marry him,” she said.

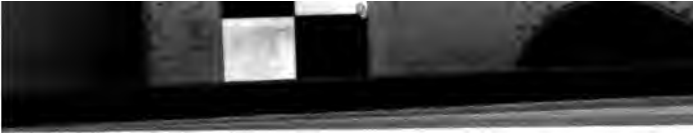
“But why all this secrecy?” said Margaret, “if everything is all right?”

“I’ll explain that later on, but I don’t want to say anything more until Captain Barrington comes home again,” replied Ann. “Only—dear old Marge—you can make your mind easy: it’s all right. I’m going to have everything I want in the world. Everything! I’m certain to be happy. But I don’t want to talk about it yet.”

“Is he nice?” pursued Margaret.

“He’s——” Ann paused. “Well, he is quite the most attractive man I ever met. Is *that* good enough for you?”

And Margaret, gazing at the ring, had to acknowledge her satisfaction. She even refrained from mentioning the subject again for the twenty-four hours of her visit that still remained to be spent, which really shows her, if nothing else has, to be a girl of rather uncommon character. Only when the train was about



to move out of the railway station did she utter one last warning.

“Send him to see father directly he comes home,” she said. “Things are all very well, but send him to see father. When does he return?”

“Thursday,” said Ann.

“Oh, then you might manage Saturday. I have my ambulance drill on that afternoon, but I’ll stay at home if you can manage to send him over. I will, indeed. Though it’s stretcher drill, and tremendously important.”

She called out the last words as the train moved along the platform, and a moment later Ann stood alone in the draughty station, looking down the line.

Something in the gleaming metals struck coldly on her imagination, though she did not put the impression into any definite thought. They stretched out before her, an iron road, immutably fixed—but what was there in that?

Yet she went home chilled by the vaguely sad atmosphere of a railway station on a grey day.

CHAPTER XII

BETROTHAL

HOWEVER, this mood, or shadow of a mood, had quite passed away by the following Thursday evening. When Ann came forth from the room at the Red Grange in which she had been dressing for dinner, and looked over the musicians' gallery at Barrington and his aunt who waited for her by the hall fire, she was more deeply impressed than ever before by the charm and luxury of her surroundings. She loved beautiful things, and felt deeply glad that she would one day possess this lovely old house for her own home. And Barrington himself was a most gallant centre figure, manly, kind, devoted. She turned away at last and went down the wide staircase filled with a most peaceful, radiant sense of life's purpose achieved. All the happy days, the long, prosperous years, spread out before her as she slowly descended the shallow oak staircase, her fine lover hastening towards her.

Then suddenly, without the slightest warning, she felt herself falling. A moment later she had recovered herself, and stood clinging to the broad rail, unhurt, a look of scared surprise gradually fading from her face.

"Are you hurt?" asked Barrington, with his arm about her. "How did it happen?"



“I—I don’t know.”

Ann fought for self-control, but she was trembling violently.

“Caught your foot in your gown, dear? Poor little girl,” soothed Barrington in a low voice.

“It—it was a most horrid feeling,” said Ann, still nervously excited. “A coldness—and as if some one pushed me—as if there was some one behind *wanting* me to be hurt. It came quite suddenly. I was feeling so jolly.”

“That’s all fancy, dear,” said Barrington, stroking her icy hand. “You have been listening to village tales about old Courtenay. You were frightened before when you stayed here. Sweetheart, the old chap did me a good turn that night—do you remember? And if the tales are true, it’s I who ought to be pushed downstairs, not you.”

“Why, what have you done?” said Ann, laughing tremulously. “I didn’t think old Ralph Courtenay was in a position——”

“I’m going to own this house, that’s all,” said Barrington, talking on to reassure her. “He swore that nobody who was not of his own blood should ever possess the Red Grange.”

“Oh, well, he won’t prevent it now,” said Ann lightly. “I’m all right now, Arthur. I can’t think why I was so silly. I never have these queer, superstitious feelings in any house but this, and I was never in the least afraid of ghosts or anything until I came here.”

Barrington glanced towards the fireplace. “I dare say my aunt had got a bit on your nerves,” he said.

"You're very level-headed, but it would tell on any young girl."

"I suppose that sort of thing is infectious," said Ann.

"Infection?" said Mrs. Barrington, approaching. "Oh no, not when you are grown up. At least, not very. And most of the cases are in the cottages behind the church."

They smiled at each other and went towards the fire.

"Ann stumbled," said Barrington, making conversation, "but she is not hurt."

"I will have the carpet looked at. We must take great care of Ann," smiled Mrs. Barrington; and her words also were meaningless, but a very charming meaning lay behind them. For it was thus that she drew Ann into the intimate circle of her family life and affections, just as plainly as if she had spoken for a long time.

"I hope you'll let me take care of you," responded Ann, touched to an eager sincerity.

"You've been awfully good to us, aunt," said Barrington. "We'll—we'll do our best to give you something back. Won't we, Ann?"

Ann stood between them, looking down, smitten by a sudden, faint sense of unworthiness. They took her so wholeheartedly into the centre of their lives, and of the life of this house.

As she stood there on the great hearth, slim in her white gown, with the dark hair shading her cheeks, she knew this to be a solemn betrothal, and felt gravely ready to perform all they should ask of her.

"I will do my best," she said.

Mrs. Barrington kissed her.

"Then that's settled. Oh, is dinner ready? Come, Arthur, you shall give an arm to each of us to-night."

So they went to a meal decked with white flowers in quite bridal fashion, though the engagement was supposed to remain a secret from the household until Dr. Middleton's consent had been formally asked. The hostess wore her grey brocade in honour of the occasion, and sat like an immense silver idol at the head of the table. Ann had not seen the gown since that day on which death seemed to hover over the Red Grange, and whenever she saw it now, gleaming under the bright lights, she felt passionately thankful that Mrs. Barrington remained alive. It would have spoilt everything, always, if they had wished her dead and she had died.

The slight oppression of this thought, however, did not prevent their being very gay together, talking of the beautiful places Ann was to see very soon and which the other two already knew so well. Then, after dinner, Mrs. Barrington retired to the morning-room, while Ann went back to the hall with her lover. They sat on the oak settle in the great, dimly lighted place, and the firelight fell exquisitely on Ann's face and gown and upon Barrington's handsome figure. It was a picture for a story-book written by a young girl who sees life through her pretty dreams; it was so charming and, in some undefined way, so unreal.

"Darling!" said Barrington, putting his arm round Ann and drawing her close to him on the seat. "You don't know how hungry I've been for this all these weeks—how I've longed to kiss you again. I nearly came home. I didn't know what to do. But I'm glad now that I stayed where I was. Everything has

turned out so splendidly. 'Pon my word, Ann, I feel as if I should go off my head with joy. I never knew I had it in me to love any woman as I do you."

"Dear boy, I'm so glad!" Ann murmured.

"We'll have a splendid time," he continued. "When I think of taking you round and showing you all the jolly places——" He broke off and crushed her tightly to him, kissing her as he had never done before. "Ann," he whispered, "it will have to be soon! I can't wait long for my little wife."

She lay passive in his arms until the embrace was over, and then, even in that pleasant light, he noticed the ghastly pallor of her face as she leaned her head back against the oak settle.

"Dearest," he whispered, "have I startled you? Ought I not to have kissed you like that? I won't do it any more to-night. But you'll learn not to mind, sweetheart."

Her pallor touched him inexpressibly, and he loved her with a passionate tenderness of which he had not dreamed himself capable, as he sat by her, just holding her hand in a light grasp, and telling her amusing tales of what he had seen and done in different parts of the world.

After a while Mrs. Barrington returned with a book in her hand, and tea was brought in, and very soon the car came round.

Ann was still pale as she said good-bye, and Mrs. Barrington took the slim hand on which the engagement ring sparkled with a kind shake of the head.

"The ring is a little too loose," she said, "but we will not have it altered. I am going to insist on a



course of cod liver oil and cream. The finger must grow to fit the ring, Ann."

"Really I am perfectly well," said Ann, flushing.

"Doesn't look much like the typical British matron, though, does she?" smiled Barrington.

And half-an-hour later Ann was in her own bedroom, seated, still fully dressed, by the window, her whole being in a tumult of confused emotions, amid which only one fact stood out clear. She hated to be kissed by the man whom she was about to marry. This was all the more confusing in that she had before found his caresses pleasant. What had happened? Were they different, or was she different?

She pushed that last question away, declining to face it; and still the maddening circle of thoughts went round, while the clock ticked the minutes away, and the troubled, secret heart of her waited for a sign.

Midnight struck. She felt deadly tired, but she was obliged to wait, though she would not own to herself that she was waiting.

Half-past twelve—one—half-past one. Then, far off in the night, came the sound of a footfall, so light that only one whose soul was waiting to hear it could have heard it.

Ann looked out of her dark room, herself unseen, and the starlight showed Finlay's thin, short figure, but not his features.

He looked incredibly commonplace, in his old Norfolk jacket and cap, to be that for which the secret heart of a tired girl had been long waiting. Ann closed her window very gently and went to bed. The questions were all answered. She was sure that she did not love Stephen Finlay.

Immediately after breakfast next morning Ann sat down to write to her father. It had been arranged on the previous evening at the Red Grange that she should remain at home in order to do this, and that she should suggest a visit from Barrington on the following Monday or Tuesday, if convenient to Dr. Middleton.

She removed the top from her fountain pen, and, being debarred from the resource of the old-fashioned heroine who invariably bit the end of her pen, she stared instead at Mrs. Walker's paper daffodils. Finally she began: "My dear Father, you will be surprised to hear——" and stopped short at that, gazing this time out of the window.

A strong east wind had sprung up since morning, frosting the panes with sea-spray, and as Ann looked through those countless tiny prisms of salt water she saw neither the terrace road nor the public gardens, nor even her own future as it had appeared to her the previous evening. It, her prosperous future, suffered a sea-change as she looked into a future which was not at all prosperous—only very disturbing and wonderful.

She saw life before her at that moment, a long life lived in poverty and obscurity, and it appeared glorious.

The sight made her afraid, and she jumped up, pushing her writing materials together in feverish haste. She must convince herself, once and for all, that life as seen through the spray on the windows was a mirage, an enchantment—something which had no connection at all with reality.

As she flashed out of the door and down the terrace

between all those newly dimmed windows, her scarf flew out in the salt breeze, her breath came quickly through her parted lips, all her instinct of self-preservation, alert, looked out of her startled eyes. Without pausing to think, she hurried along to the brickyard, urged by that instinct—her whole energies bent on seeing Finlay—on once more confronting a dream with a shabby, ordinary reality.

Near the gate of the brickyard she met a workman, and flung at him a breathless, "Mr. Finlay in?"

"That's his office. Keep straight on," said the man, eyeing her curiously. "Oh, there you are," as Finlay emerged in his old office coat with a paper in his hand.

The office was a dismal erection of corrugated iron, against which Finlay's slim figure and clean-cut face stood out with an indescribable effect of sordid forlornness.

"You!" he exclaimed, stopping short. "Miss Middleton, is anything the matter?"

"No—yes——" Now Ann realized the wilderness of this chase after fact and the difficulty of explaining her presence here. "I—I only just wanted to see you about—about—about a book you promised to lend me."

"A book!" said Finlay.

"Yes," said Ann. "It—I hate having nothing to read—and as I wanted a walk——"

"But all my books are at my lodgings," began Finlay; then, as he looked closely at her, her lip began to tremble, and she covered her face with her hands.

"Hush!" he said in low tones, glancing at the workman who stood a little way off looking towards

them. "Come in here. There's no one in here. Don't cry—don't cry!"

He hurried her into the little dusty place, and she sat down on a bench, trying to control her tears, but they came from the pent-up emotion of the past weeks and could not at once be subdued. Finlay stood by her, looking at her, his face very set. Once he put out his hand to touch her, but did not do so. At last she looked up and met his eyes, and knew that he knew.

"Dear, it's no good," he said, at the end of a long silence.

"No," she answered, "it's no good!"

Then silence again, until she rose to go; but at the door she turned round upon him, fierce with pain and anger.

"It's a shame!" she cried. "A bitter, bitter shame! I get everything I've wanted in life—money, position, a man I could have loved, everything—and then you come and spoil it!"

His face went grey-white, but he stood very still, and said quietly enough—

"That's unfair, Ann."

"I know it is," cried Ann, "but that makes things no better. Anyway, here we are——" and her lip trembled again.

"If you really care like that," he said after a pause. "I have so little to offer you—still, if you care enough——" He came quite near to her now, gazing into her face, and despite his quietness his eyes were like beacon fires, signalling the urgency of his need. He had such desperate need of her love to save him.

She looked and found courage; then she noticed the

frayed cuff of his office-coat, and the coward in her triumphed.

"No," she said. "I can't. I'm not built that way, Stephen."

He held the door open for her, and without another word they walked to the gate of the brickyard. A banner of smoke blew out from the tall chimney, and a few particles of soot fell on them as they went along. A sea-gull flew, raucously screaming, from some ploughed land near; the fumes of impure gas rose from the little, local gas works; it was all dismal, sordid, unforgettable.

At the gate they paused.

"What made you come?" said Finlay.

"To see you."

He looked at her—hesitating—then straightened his shoulders and walked away without saying anything.

She stood quite still, listening to his peculiarly light, even step. It did not drag in the least, and yet she knew he was mortally hurt—after many wounds. And it was she who had hurt him so.

She heard him speaking to a workman, and she started to walk home. His life would be going on like that—going on like that—

In a dull apathy where one aimless thought went round and round like a squirrel in a cage, she walked along the cliff. But when her glove fell to the ground and she put out her left hand to pick it up, she was startled out of her preoccupation. Her engagement ring had gone. She remembered now that it could not have been on her finger when she was with Finlay, or he would have spoken of it.

She retraced her steps, looking carefully on either

side of the road, and inquiring of passers by, but the ring was not to be found.

It was almost one o'clock when Ann finally reached the terrace, after informing the police and the town-crier of her loss. The letter to her father obviously could not be written before luncheon. But immediately the meal was finished, she again put forth her writing materials and wrote the date on a clean sheet of note-paper. As she did so, the voice of the town-crier came stridently down the terrace, and people all ran to their doors and windows to listen.

“Lost! This morning—Between Sea-view Terrace—and the brickyard—A lady’s gold ring—Set with opals and diamonds. Any one returning the same to seven, Sea-view Terrace—Will be suitably rewarded!”

Ann raised her head and looked at the town-crier plodding past, an integral part of the life of Woden-scar. He cried the sale of property and the loss of property, and yet none ever came to him. He cried amusements and entertainments and junketings, yet never went to any. And whoever got suitably rewarded, it was never the town-crier.

Ann went to the gate as he passed.

“Do you think it will be found?” she said.

He glanced at her with the lack of interest which so much finding and never keeping naturally promoted.

“No telling,” he said. Then he raised his head and opened his mouth, and bellowed forth afresh, “Lost! This morning——”

Ann waited until he had finished.

"But do you think it is at all possible?" she urged.

"Anything's possible," he said, looking stolidly away from her towards the sea. "I've known a thimble turn up. I've known a portmantle lost for ever. There's no telling."

"But you think it *may*," insisted Ann.

He turned his gaze slowly upon her. His business was to cry, not to deal in conjecture.

"There's no telling," he repeated again. Then something in Ann's face stirred him a very little. "One thing—I've noticed—if you don't care much—it turns up. If you do care much—it mostlings doesn't." He tramped away towards the parade.

Ann went back to her letter, and felt glad to know that Barrington was away for the day on business, therefore he would not call to interrupt her letter-writing. But how would it be if she waited until morning? Her thoughts might be clearer then. She could not collect her thoughts sufficiently to write this important letter until the matter of the ring was settled one way or another.

Yes. That should be it. If the ring came back before post time, she would write the letter. If not, it must wait until the next day. Barrington could not blame her. He would understand how distressed she must be by the loss of his beautiful ring.

She sat down by the window, resolutely determined to think of Barrington and the Red Grange and the ring. She would push all other thoughts away. The Grange—how charming it was—and how fine the panelled hall had looked in the firelight.

*He is plodding about the brickyard in the dust—
the high chimney raining smoke upon him.*

Barrington will come in the morning. The letter shall be written by then, of course, and how glad they will all be at home. There will be white satin and a lovely wedding—

His cuff was frayed—he wants a woman to take care of him.

She sat with the sea-wind in her face, and her thoughts were vague, and yet, through the vagueness, she knew that she was in some way staking her future on the return of that ring. From all parts of Woden-scar came the strident refrain: "Any one returning the same will be suitably rewarded." And she knew that her whole life hung on the response to that droning refrain.

She could also hear, through the wide-open window, the church clock striking the hours. A quarter to six. Six. A quarter-past.

Then a girl, a stranger to Ann, came hurrying down the terrace. She looked anxiously in at the window.

"Are you the lady that's lost the ring?" she demanded.

"Yes."

"Is this it?" She held it up, glistening in the sunshine.

"Yes."

Then the clock clanged out half-past.

"Too late for the post!" breathed Ann.

"What—you—say? Too late!" exclaimed the girl.

"No. No. I'm—I'm very glad. Thank you," said Ann incoherently.

Then she gave the suitable reward, sending the girl away very happy, and Mrs. Walker came in to lay the supper.

“My!” she remarked, “you’re in luck to get your ring back like that. It’s only the lucky ones who say there isn’t such a thing as luck.”

Then she went back to finish a lavender blouse, and Ann was left in the silent room with her own thoughts.

But now she made no further attempt to write the letter.

She sat in a chair by the fire, staring at it as it died down to grey ashes, so intensely engrossed in her inner life that the outer one, for the moment, did not exist for her. She remained motionless, her head bent a little forward, her eyes fixed. She had reached that centre point of intense emotion, where there is perfect quiet.

At about eleven o’clock she went upstairs. But though she flung herself down on her bed like one exhausted and lay inert, gazing at the shadows of the furniture on the ceiling, she did not attempt to undress. Her body was nothing save a battle-ground, and no battle ever sung or written of, is so full of wild alarms, and desperate attacks, and splendid triumphs, as the battle which goes on in the soul of the least human being who is fighting self for love.

At twelve o’clock Ann rose from her bed and stood listening. She leaned forward, grasping her fingers tightly upon the window-sill. No one else would have heard the distant footfall, but she heard it. She stood up, waiting for her lover with that high expectancy of body and spirit which is true love.

At last he was beneath her window.

"Stephen!" she said.

He stopped short and saw her leaning towards him from her window. After those long hours of weary tramping in the dark he was like a tired traveller who sees a vision blooming suddenly upon the night. She seemed to him just so wonderful in the square of light against the houses. He looked at her in silence.

"Stephen," she called softly. "Wait for me. I want to speak to you."

He waited. He waited with the boom of the sea in his ears and the spring night all about him. At last she crept out, and they went past the little houses to the terrace end, where the sea spread out dim and luminous beneath the stars. There are no bounds set between earth and heaven for lovers on such a night. So they quickly reach the heaven where words cease to matter.

Ann felt Stephen's arm about her, and he felt her fresh cheek pressed to his, and they had said everything worth saying in the world, though not a word had been spoken.

"My poor boy," whispered Ann at last. "You've been crying. I can feel your eyes are wet."

"No, no," he answered. "Only——" And then it all came out at last. "Oh, Ann, I've been so miserable! I've been so miserable!"

She pulled his head down upon her shoulder. It was a most sacred moment in their love when he could tell her that, and let her comfort him.

She held him so, while the sea boomed and the lighthouse beacon gleamed twice—white—red—once

for love of the body—once for love of the spirit, across the dim expanse.

“Do you want me, Stephen?” she murmured.

“Want you!”

He let her go, then grasped both her hands, and they stood so, trembling.

“Then you must take me *now*. If not— Oh, Stephen, I could go to the world’s end with you now.”

“And! what do you mean?”

They gazed at each other, very pale in the starlight, their eyes shining out of the misty pallor of their faces.

“I could go—now,” said Ann. “If you’ll take me now, through the fields, I’ll come with you. Then we’ll get to a little country station in the early morning—”

“Darling!” He drew her almost roughly towards him. “I can’t tell you—I can’t tell you how I love you.” Then he released her again with a sort of groan. “It’s not fair—to you—to run away with you like that. You’d regret—I must give you time to think. You’re—you’re trying me too high, Ann.” He paused, breathless, the beads of sweat standing out on his pale forehead.

“If you don’t take me now you will never have me,” said Ann, with passionate earnestness. “I know myself. I shall be afraid. I shall marry Arthur Barrington—”

“Not while I live!” shouted Finlay. “No other man shall touch you.”

“Hush! Hush!” said Ann, looking back at the quiet houses.

"Are you engaged to Barrington?" he said.

"Yes."

"Then you must break with him first. I'll steal no man's sweetheart."

Ann looked most firmly up at him.

"Stephen," she said, "you don't know me. You don't understand. If I go back now, I shall marry Arthur Barrington. And I shall regret it all my life. I shall never have been what I could be. Stephen, Stephen"—she was clinging desperately to him now—"help me to be the best I can—"

"But I'm poor—those years in prison—" He stammered, nearly at the end of his strength.

"They're nothing—now. They'll go on being nothing, if you'll only take me away with you. Stephen, I love you. Love's all that matters—"

"You think so now, dear, but what about afterwards?"

She threw her arms round him, sobbing out, "I shall be your wife then. Nothing will matter then, but you and me, Stephen. Only I can't face the struggle with father, and the explanations with the Barringtons, and the hopeless muddle of it all. I can't! I can't!"

"Dear, we can't run away to be married like this," he said, trying to speak lightly. Then he chanced to touch her bare arm, and the blood flamed out on his damp forehead. He drew her quickly towards him.

"You mean it!" he said. "You're ready to run away and get married to-night? Then so am I. I'm ready to face hell so long as you're with me. Only remember, Ann, it'll be hell if I ever see you regret—"

“Stephen! You never will! You never will!”

They clung together, so little on the edge of the cliff against the waste of sea and sky; and then Ann crept back into the house to prepare for her wedding journey.

It was with the desperate courage of the coward that she put on her tweed gown and simple hat, but as strength is made perfect in weakness, so, sometimes, is courage made perfect in cowardice.

Just when the dawn wind was blowing across the fields she crept from her door, and they went hand in hand down the terrace. The air was filled with fragrance, and they felt that solemn rapture which comes but once in a lifetime as they stepped softly together past the little, silent houses and the gardens where the wallflowers were all wet with dew.

So they began their honeymoon.

CHAPTER XIII

ADVENTURE

THEY walked a little way down the road and entered the field path which leads away from the sea. The last star went out of the sky as they stood there, glancing back towards Wodenscar, which still lay hidden by the soft darkness of a May night. But the road and the fields were higher than the town, so Stephen and Ann felt the dawn already coming. Birds wakened as they went along. The east grew luminous.

At the top of the fields they turned again, and saw the dawn run out to meet the day in a flush of tender greeting. All the sea and the cliffs, and the little town, lay hushed in a roseate mist that had come up from the sea.

Ann looked out under the arch of heaven through the sea mist, and life, death, love, eternity, all suffered a sea-change into something so glorious and poignant that her heart could hardly bear it.

Then she looked at her lover. His face was very clear-cut and pale in the dawn, his eyes worshipped her.

“Well, Stephen?” And she smiled a little.

“I’ve sometimes wondered if life were worth while,” he said in a low voice. “I know now it is, if I never have another minute’s happiness.”

They stood quiet for a few minutes while the sun-

rise on the sea strengthened, spread out triumphantly before them; then they went on again through the dewy freshness of the morning. As they passed through a village, smoke began to rise from the chimneys, a girl flung open a cottage door and her young husband stood laughing behind her, dogs barked, a boy ran whistling down the road—the world was awake.

“Did you ever know such a morning?” said Ann, and there was truly something in her voice which echoed the joyous sounds of the day’s awaking.

“Never—— Oh, Ann, how pretty your fingers are! No one ever had such pretty fingers.”

After that they were silent again until they neared the railway station, but their silence was as full of song and colour and freshness as the silence of that May morning. At the brown wooden gate of the little station they paused for a moment.

“It’s been so lovely!” whispered Ann, “the beginning of our honeymoon. Now we’ve got to think about things——”

“Not yet. We won’t think yet.” He broke off a scrap of the station-master’s sweetbriar which was just uncurling into young leaf. “Here’s a keepsake, Ann.”

She pushed it into her blouse.

“I don’t need one, Stephen. While I remember anything——”

He bent down, smelling the sweetbriar at her breast, and all that he had suffered in his life seemed to be obliterated by the joy of this moment.

“You know,” she smiled at him, “we’re a pair of idiots—that’s what everyone will call us——”

"Because they envy us. People have to laugh at love—they're so afraid of crying for it——"

"Oh, Stephen. Here is the station-master."

And so at last they had to begin to think; but they could not make anything really matter save their love and themselves, even when they bent over the table in the little office writing telegrams. Vaguely, Ann understood that a great deal of suffering and inconvenience would soon be going on somewhere, but the knowledge seemed to have no body, no actuality. She was very sorry, but only, as it were, outside; her inner self was too filled with joy to leave room for anything else.

"Poor Barrington!" said Stephen in all sincerity; but he might have been speaking of a jilted lover in Mars, so little did the matter actually seem to concern him.

"If that's how you take it!" said Ann, looking up from the telegram.

"Well—can I help being sorry for a man who is losing you?"

"Dear Stephen!"

The station-master peeped in, beaming and curious, and he knew at once that two people could not be so foolish as that unless they were still unmarried lovers—for folly is that flower of love which the tempest of possession blows away.

Stephen and Ann, however, were at full flush of the blossoming time, and their sense of each other's presence as they leaned together, planning what to say, was so poignantly near as to make everything else seem far off.

"I can't think how to word it," said Ann. "Yet I

must let Arthur Barrington know before anyone else. It is only fair to him."

"Of course you must," said Stephen. "I know—'Suddenly called away. Urgent business. Am writing.' Won't that do? Now I must wire to the brick-yard."

"Urgent business, too?" said Ann. "And your bed not slept in, nor mine either—and your landlady and Mrs. Walker living next door! Don't you know anything about the terrace yet, Stephen?"

"I suppose," said Stephen, gazing at Ann's left eyebrow, "that they might put two and two together."

"Or one and one!"

They laughed fatuously, leaving for a moment the consideration of Barrington's telegram. But it had to be faced in the end, and Ann drew a clean telegraph form towards her, saying defiantly—

"I won't leave him to guess and hear all sorts of tales. It's not fair. I'll tell him the plain truth." She wrote a few words and handed the paper to Stephen. "There!"

He read it and looked grave.

"That ends everything. No drawing back after that, Ann."

"I made it impossible to go back without marrying you when I came away as I did."

"You realized you were—you did it on purpose?"

"Yes."

"You were afraid you might go back!"

She looked him straight in the face.

"I was, then. I know now I never could, after our walk through the fields this morning. But—I hadn't found out then how much I loved you, Stephen."

“My own, dear girl!”

The station-master coughed, passing the door again, and Stephen went out with a sheaf of telegrams in his hand.

“Can you send them at once?”

“Not from here. Office in the village.”

“Oh!” They stared blankly at each other. “And the train is almost due.”

But the sympathetic station-master undertook to send the telegrams at once to the post-office and waved cheerfully as the train steamed out of the little flowery station, taking the lovers upon the second stage of their wedding journey.

“Nice station-master,” said Ann. “I believe he once ran away to be married himself.”

“Married!” Stephen started. “By Jove, Ann, there’s all that to be thought of. I *must* think. You stay here and I’ll sit at the other end of the railway carriage. Now. I’ve wired to my brother for some money. He has always been ready to lend me anything I wanted, only I didn’t—I wouldn’t— However, he is sure to send it. And I think I may get an archbishop’s licence so that we can be married at once, without residence in London. A barrister I used to be very friendly with, will go with me to see about it, and he is well known—a man of weight—it will be all right. We’ll let your father know, and if he cares to come to the wedding he can.”

“He does not know where we are staying, so he can’t come. I forgot to say!” exclaimed Ann, jumping up.

“But you don’t know yourself. We had not thought of anywhere,” Stephen answered. “Oh, I

say, Ann, *don't* come near me. We must think. We must think."

"You goose! We've got all the rest of our lives to think in," said Ann, sitting beside him.

"Yes, you're right." He drew her to him and they looked out together at the spring landscape jogging sedately past. "We won't think. We'll be happy while we can!"

"We shall always be happy!" said Ann.

And when they reached the Junction, and took their places at a grey slate table set with thick bread and butter and ugly white cups, they were in very truth most happy. This first breakfast was to each such an exquisite delight, because of that knowledge that they would meet like this every morning during all their lives. They trembled and could not eat at first, from the sheer wonder and joy of realizing at last that in every common way they were indeed going to spend their lives together. But youth and a healthy appetite triumphed, and they were soon eating the thick bread-and-butter and marmalade with relish, laughing over the flies that infested the place, and even enjoying a stale currant bun.

They took lunch in the train, which was crowded, and in the early afternoon they emerged from King's Cross Station with London before them.

It was a sunny day, and as the taxi-cab rushed along out of the squalor to the gay streets near which Ann's modest hotel was situated, they both felt more alive than ever before. The great rush of life in the London streets in May seemed to enter into them and they were filled with an immense sense of being in it and of it all. The world was going round gloriously,

dizzily, splendidly, and they with it—they were conscious of the swing—they wanted to shout with the sheer joy of love and life.

The hall porter of the hotel, however, reminded them that there did exist people to whom everything still seemed to be of an ordinary dullness, and then Stephen hurried off to find his friend and make arrangements about the licence, while Ann went up in the lift to her little room on the top floor. She was just seated in an arm-chair, with closed eyes and a confused medley of all she had seen during the day swimming through her brain, when a light tap sounded on the door.

“What is it?” she said, starting up.

“It’s only me—Stephen——”

She opened the door and looked out. They stood alone on the long, draughty corridor.

“Well?” she said anxiously.

“Nothing, nothing.” He looked a little foolish. “I say, Ann, it was only that I couldn’t believe, dear, you were here waiting for me. I’d got nearly to Lincoln’s Inn when I began to have the queerest feeling that it must be a dream or a delusion—I had to come and make sure.”

“Stephen, you old silly!” cried Ann. Then she held up her face to him. “Dear, I’m the same—I was just thinking it couldn’t be true. If any one could know how foolish we were——”

They laughed together secretly, looking up and down the empty corridor. It was a delicious moment, at the end of which Stephen tore himself away and raced headlong down the interminable flights of stairs.

"The lift, the lift!" called Ann.

"Good-bye!" he shouted back, not hearing what she said as he ran a glorious race down those hundreds of shallow, carpeted stairs to the panting taxi outside. Ann returned to her room and rested a little, until some sort of order was restored to her whirling thoughts. The ordinary affairs of life began gradually to resume their wonted place. She looked at the handkerchief on her lap—plainly she would need some more before Mrs. Walker would have time to send her boxes. And a hairbrush—one by one her various requirements became plain to her imagination.

Then, as she walked out of the hotel and up the short street leading into Oxford Street, a new necessity darted into her mind so suddenly that she stood quite still for a moment, and allowed a respectable, fat gentleman from Yorkshire to walk straight into her.

She stood there, blushing and glowing and looking so very sweet that the respectable fat gentleman almost remembered he was a gentleman, and not a mere collector of vested interests, but the pretty girl remained so plainly unaware of his existence that he passed on at once.

Ann also walked away in the direction of a huge draper's shop where she intended to purchase such things as were needed for the night, but the idea which had so thrillingly seized her, to the momentary undoing of a most correct and honoured citizen, was the thought of her trousseau.

This may seem a trivial matter to men, and will no doubt appear so to a future generation of women, but in the meantime there is an inherited instinct of ages to make a girl wish to wear beautiful garments when

she gives herself to her husband. The old, old song, "Her clothing shall be of wrought needlework—the King's daughter shall be all beautiful," came echoing down the ages to Ann in its plain sense, apart from its mystical interpretation, as she stood staring into the window of a draper's shop in Oxford Street.

Then secretly, because north countrywomen always expect to have their purses snatched from them in London, she counted out her little hoard of money, and found it to be insufficient for the purchase of the fine cambric and embroidery for which she longed. She went into the shop and bought what was required for the night, and then walked down the long, glittering street, wondering what she could do. And as she went she suddenly remembered the diamond brooch she wore which had belonged to her mother—the mother who had died so long ago, but to whose memory she now turned with a sudden ache of longing. Almost for the first time in her life she consciously wanted her mother.

She took out the brooch and held it in her hand, looking at it with a tender gravity. Supposing she were to sell that to buy her wedding clothes—would her mother mind if she could know?

Something grew warm round Ann's heart. Perhaps it is that even in death mothers can never be parted from the little children they leave behind. Anyway, as Ann went along amid the glare and bustle she knew that her mother would be glad to have a part in her wedding, would rejoice, if she could know, to have still some share in her girl's happiness.

So, after a little search, Ann found a suitable jeweller's and sold the brooch for a reasonable sum,

then went back on wings to the window where the dainty cambric and embroidery were displayed amid lucky streamers of blue ribbon, meet for a happy bride. She could only purchase a very few of those delectable garments, but they were so precious that she would not trust any one to carry them home save herself, and returned to the hotel with the parcel in her arms.

As soon as she entered the rather gloomy hall, however, the less pleasant realities of life began to force themselves upon her. A telegram from her father in response to one sent naming her hotel was handed to her. He would be with her late that night.

She regretted now that she had, after all, been persuaded by Stephen to let her father know where she was staying, and something of the first joy and glamour of the adventure departed, never to return.

Then she remembered the absolute necessity for writing to Barrington, so that he should receive the letter by the first post in the morning. In the telegram she had said baldly, "Gone away with Stephen Finlay. Shall be married as soon as licence can be obtained." That seemed brutal, and yet, of all ways, in the circumstances, the least unfair to him. Neither she nor Stephen could bear to think of such a man at the mercy of Mrs. Walker's guesses and the swift conclusions of the landlady next door. He had been, at least, immediately placed in the superior position so far as accurate knowledge was concerned.

But now Ann sat at a table in the writing-room, with a girl scribbling only three feet away, and an elderly woman just behind. The atmosphere was permeated with holiday bustle, and she could not collect her thoughts. Scratch, scratch, scratch went the girl's

pen, while the precious minutes slipped away. What could she say? There was nothing—nothing. But something had to be said.

“DEAR CAPTAIN BARRINGTON” (she wrote at last),
“I won’t ask you to forgive me because of course you can’t. I have behaved dreadfully to you and there is an end of it. But you must see how much I care for Stephen Finlay when I am ready to give up all you have to offer in order to be his wife. And I do indeed think I should have done you a worse injury if I had married you, feeling like that.

“Yours sincerely,

“ANN MIDDLETON.”

“P.S.—Mrs. Barrington was right when she said I should bring you nothing but unhappiness. It seems no use saying I am sorry—you will naturally think my sorrow not worth much—but I did think I loved you—I did indeed.”

She read over the straggling, badly written lines and saw how stupid and inadequate they were, but her brain seemed incapable of connected thought, and she knew that if she were to try for hours the result would be no better, so she addressed the envelope and went to post it in the hotel letter-box. And as she glanced across the hall there was suddenly released one of those mind-pictures which are stored by the million in every mind, awaiting only the pressure of that hidden spring of which no human being yet knows the secret. She saw Barrington standing in the firelight of the great hall at the Red Grange with the peculiar clearness which such pictures have, quite different from a

mere memory. And for a moment her great liking for him and her intense self-reproach dissipated the glamorous mist by which she was then surrounded.

It was during this moment that Stephen saw her from the doorway, and the clear radiance of his happy bridegroom look shadowed to a reflection of her sombre preoccupation. Was she already regretting, then?

He came across the hall, and was almost by her side before she noticed him.

"It's all right," he said, but not with the joyousness which had been in those words as he rehearsed them, hastening back to her.

"When?"

"Day after to-morrow. Archbishop's licence!"

"Nearly fifty pounds! But—oh, Stephen!"

They stood decorously apart, with busy holiday-makers bumping past them, but Stephen no longer feared lest Ann might be beginning to regret, for her eyes were shining like stars again and her face was pale with emotion. The something exquisitely girlish in her appearance which had appealed to Barrington was so intensified that no wonder Stephen saw her surrounded by a sort of flaming whiteness in which was a sound of music and a scent of lilies.

In plain terms he was rapturously happy, because he had just told Ann they were to be married the day after to-morrow, and she seemed glad of it, but no plain terms can describe the strange wonders that come and go in the mind of the most ordinary man who ardently loves a girl, on the eve of marriage. It is a little enchanted time, and has no more to do with real life before or after than a visit to the fairies or the

finding of a crock of gold. And most men forget it, just as children forget who have seen the fairies.

But these two were in the midst of the glory; and when a tall, acidulated lady said, "Excuse me," they stepped aside from her path and beamed idiotically upon her, as if she were a daughter of the gods new-risen from the clouds to give them greeting. And immediately afterwards they absolutely and completely forgot everybody in the world but themselves. Barington, with all the rest, went down below the horizon and they sat upon Olympus alone, with odd sons and daughters of the gods, such as the acidulated lady and the fat gentleman, appearing and disappearing again among the clouds.

Nothing, however, can make dinner really unsubstantial, and they partook of it at a quiet restaurant with Stephen's barrister friend, who actually seemed to think that food mattered and was particular about the asparagus. He must have been indeed a friend, because he remained friendly and gay throughout a well-chosen and expensive dinner for which he was paying, and of which his guests ate as if it were sawdust, remaining flatly, desolatingly unconvivial.

He was exhausted when they rose to go; but they said, with truth, that they had enjoyed themselves immensely, and were under the impression that they had been very pleasant companions.

As Ann leaned from the door of the taxi-cab to say farewell, he slipped an envelope into her hand.

"My little wedding present," he murmured, "to be spent as directed."

"Oh, how kind! Of course," said Ann, flushing.

"You'll remember that then, Finlay," said he, smil-

ing. "It's not honest, you know, to have a cheque given you especially to buy a kettle with and then to use the money for a rolling-pin."

"Of course not. Most dishonourable!" laughed Ann.

Then they went off, leaving the friend planted there with a little twisted smile on his face. How splendid it was—while it lasted! And every fresh lover knew it was going to last for ever.

He hunched his shoulders and walked on, thankful at any rate for a good dinner, while the lovers in the taxi opened his envelope and found a cheque for a hundred pounds enclosed in a scrap of paper on which was written, "To spend on your honeymoon!"

"Oh, the dear, the dear!" cried Ann. "But all that—we never can!"

"We will!" said Stephen, holding her close to him as they rushed along. "Whatever we get in life, we can never have another honeymoon together. If we miss that, we can't go back for it later. We'll have a glorious one."

"Where shall we go?" whispered Ann.

"Where you like, dear. I only want some place where there's sunshine and flowers—and you."

No very coherent discussion of plans seemed possible after that, and even the blankness of the hotel lounge at eleven o'clock, with provincial theatre-goers yawning, seemed paradise to them as they sat awaiting the arrival of Ann's father. They no longer cared greatly what he might say to them, though the interview was not one to be desired, because the fact that they would be man and wife within forty-eight hours swamped all other considerations.

A little after twelve Dr. Middleton came through the swing-doors, with his bag in his hand, and such a look of fatigue and misery on his face that Ann at last realized what her telegram must have meant to him. He stood for a moment, looking anxiously about the hall, before Stephen was able to reach him.

Then the two men's eyes met, and the grey tension of the father's face relaxed a very little.

"You're Finlay?" he said.

"Yes. Ann's gone into the drawing-room. There's no one there."

They turned and walked together, and as they went Middleton burst forth irritably—

"What the dickens have you done it like this for? If Ann wanted to marry you, she could say so, surely. But a business like this! Oh," as they entered the drawing-room, "here is Ann. Well, this is a nice business. I must say I consider it disgraceful for any decent man to place a girl he cares for in such a position."

"Father, I placed him in it!" said Ann, half laughing and half crying. "It was all my fault. I *would* run away with him."

"But there was that other fellow—Barrington—I can't understand it," said Dr. Middleton, speaking with the irritability of the chronically overworked and over-tired man. "The situation is beyond me altogether."

"That's—that's just it," said Ann excitedly. "The situation was beyond me too, father. I had to do something desperate to get out of it."

Dr. Middleton pressed a hand to his aching head and looked at Stephen.

"I've made inquiries. There seems to be nothing

against you but that unfortunate affair, which I dare say you could not help. And you have made your flight so publicly that I suppose there's no getting out of a marriage now. Can you keep her?"

"Yes, sir, I can do that. But I am a very poor man," said Stephen.

"Then you'd no right to run away with a girl like Ann," said Dr. Middleton petulantly. "God bless me, there's nothing but certain misery before you! She has not the courage to face the daily unpleasantnesses that must fall to her lot as your wife. A woman must have a very brave spirit to be happy in a cheap little house with an incompetent general servant and perhaps a tribe of children, if she is a natural lover of the good things of life, like Ann. There are such—I come across them in my practice every now and then—but Ann is not one of them." He sighed. "This wouldn't have happened, I dare say, if her mother had lived."

"It would have happened any way; it was meant to happen!" said Ann, with glowing eyes.

"After all," said Dr. Middleton, taking no notice of this remark, "I think you had better come back with me, Ann. A scandal now is better than a lifetime of regret. I speak for you too, Finlay."

Stephen stood back and looked Ann in the face. There was an indescribable dreariness about the hotel drawing-room with its greying chintzes and about the forlorn figure of Dr. Middleton in the corner. The young lovers realized at last that they were choosing partners, not for a game of play, but for a long and difficult day's work.

"I'm ready, if you are," said Ann.

"You shall not regret it," said Stephen. "I swear that so long as I have life and strength you shall not regret it."

Dr. Middleton leaned forward, pressing both palms to his throbbing temples.

"Then there's no use in my saying any more. If you will, you will. I must stay over the wedding, of course, though what will happen in my absence I don't know. Johnson is a good fellow and will do what he can. Well"—he rose—"I suppose we had better go to bed. You said you were staying at the Great Northern, Finlay, I think. Good-night. See you in the morning, of course?"

He held out his hand, still pressing the other against one temple.

"Good-night, sir," said Stephen. Then, shaken by the long strain of the past twenty-six hours and all the emotions contained in them, he blurted out, "I—there's nothing much I can say—but I'd die for her. I would indeed."

"More to the purpose if you could settle a life-annuity on her," grunted Dr. Middleton. Then, mollified by his own sharpness and touched also by the strained fervour of Stephen's look and words, he added more kindly, "It may turn out better than I fear. After all, you are both young and fond of each other. I'm sure I hope you may be happy."

He turned his back and walked to the lift, so the lovers had a moment in which to speak alone together, seen only by the scornful, indifferent eyes of the tired lift-man.

"Good-night, my darling," whispered Stephen.

“When you think there’s only once more to say ‘Good-night’——”

They clasped hands tightly, sighing the response to that lover’s litany which is repeated on the eve of every wedding, and then Stephen went away.

“Margaret was much upset,” said Dr. Middleton, as they went down the corridor.

“Oh, Margaret——” said Ann, starting from happy dreams.

“It seems she met Finlay.”

“Well, could she say anything against him?” demanded Ann, up in arms.

“No; she liked him. But she feared you would not be happy.”

“Happy!” Ann stood still in the corridor. “You all talk so much about happiness. It’s just like this, father—I’d rather be miserable with Stephen than happy with any one else in the world.”

“If you feel like that, there’s nothing more to be said,” replied Dr. Middleton, holding his door-handle, an absolutely worn-out and exhausted man whose imperative need of rest was above almost any other consideration. But some wistfulness in Ann’s voice as she bade him “Good-night” caused him to turn again and put his arm about her.

“Don’t think me hard,” he said. “God knows I only wanted to do what was best for you.”

“Oh, father, you always have,” said Ann, clinging to him for a moment. “I see now how you always have.”

“But I’ve failed. It seems to be my way to fail,” said Dr. Middleton dryly.

“ Well, anyway, my marriage is going to be an immense success,” declared Ann.

“ I hope so. I’m sure I hope so with all my heart,” said Dr. Middleton, turning into his room.

Ann entered hers, a little troubled; but the parcel of wedding clothes she had bought in the afternoon lay on the bed, and immediately the dainty, gossamer things brought back all her happy dreams, so that the grimy hotel bedroom became an antechamber to a place of perfect bliss which she was about to enter.

CHAPTER XIV

SUNSHINE AND ROSES

ANN sat with her husband on a high-backed French sofa near the window of their hotel at Mentone. She wore a ruffled pink dressing-gown, and her dark hair was drawn up in a great knot on the top of her head instead of shading her cheeks, so that she looked altogether different from the pale girl who had come out of the London church four days earlier.

"Ah! here he is," said Stephen, and called boldly, "Entrez!" to the chamber waiter, who deposited before them a tray of crescent-shaped rolls and fragrant coffee and mountain honey flavoured with wild thyme. It was such a meal as Hebe might have brought to some happy gods upon their honeymoon.

"Le temps fait très beau," remarked Ann, just to show how well she could carry off the situation.

"Yes. That is your breakfast. Please," responded the immaculate son of the Fatherland, who was at an hotel frequented by English in order to speak that language, and who intended to do it.

The door closed, while Stephen and Ann giggled together at the exquisite joke it all was, and, a light air stirring the roses outside, a great waft of perfume filled the room, mingling with the fragrance of the coffee.

"Ah—delicious!" said Ann, reaching out her left

hand for another lump of sugar, and her wedding-ring glittered in a ray of sunshine.

Stephen caught her fingers and kissed the ring which was the symbol of such joys and wonders.

"Well!" Ann laughed softly. "You wanted sunshine and flowers—and me! Are you satisfied?"

"Dearest! Are you?"

She put down her cup and pressed her head into the hollow of his shoulder. "Stephen," she whispered, "I didn't know—I never dreamed—that one could be so happy."

Then they returned to the fresh butter, and the little moon-shaped rolls, and the honey flavoured with wild thyme, and after that pretty banquet was over they finished dressing and went out through the terraced garden below the hotel into the streets where many of the shops had already closed because the season was over. Mentone was now no longer a fashionable pleasure resort, but a little Italian town basking in the sun, as it had done for centuries, while brown-eyed children played on the doorsteps of the drowsing restaurants, and portly women in flower shops and orange shops took a well-earned rest after the fatigues of the winter, gossiping pleasantly in the shade and counting up the money they had gained from the foolish tourist.

Ann was very conscious of her new wedding-ring as she went along the narrow pathways outside the little shadowy shops, and she looked at these full-blown matrons with an equal glance, as one who should say, "I, too, belong to that honoured company."

The fact was that Ann felt foolishly proud of her new estate; but all the days and nights of the honey-

moon were filled with various manifestations of this divine folly, which grew to its full height amid the sunshine, and the wonderful, blue sparkle of the Mediterranean, and the scent of countless roses.

There were only half-a-dozen visitors left in the great hotel, which was to close the week following, and those, fortunately for the bride and bridegroom, were of the English type which has brought self-consciousness to a fine art. They murmured to each other at meal-times lest a word should fall which it would not be correct for strangers to hear, and such as were alone remained elaborately silent—making, as it were, a mark of distinction of their aloneness.

So the rooms and the lovely terraced garden were only peopled, for Stephen and Ann, by shadows, who were most charmingly content to remain shadows. The perfect, noiseless service conduced to this effect, and when Ann remembered the hotel in after years she was quite unable to recall any feature of the other guests, saving the red neck of one extremely fat gentleman, which creased three-fold above his collar, and remained always in the line of vision at meal-times.

One day they walked up the slopes behind the town towards the lemon orchards, and as they mounted they were more and more conscious of the wonderful, sparkling freshness of the morning. The clear blue of sea and sky and the silvery greyness of the olive trees seemed like part of some beautiful symphony rising higher, higher, until it clashed into this glory of pale gold against the blue.

They stood together, looking, quite silent with happiness.

Then it was time to return, and they found that

they had missed their way, so Stephen went across a field to a little cottage while Ann remained upon the path, waiting for him. After a while she heard footsteps in the lemon orchard behind, and turning quickly she saw a rough-looking youth spring out almost upon her. He glanced hastily around, snatched the hand-bag she was carrying, and began to make off down the road.

It was all done in an instant, and at first Ann scarcely realized what had happened; but the impudence of the theft fired her blood and she began to run after the man, shouting to him to stop—that he was a coward.

Ann's French was not good, but the people round Mentone are used to such mutilations of their language, and the man turned at that, with a very ugly look on his face. But he also caught sight of Stephen coming back across the field and sprang over the wall into the lemon orchards, where Ann could not follow.

Stephen, however, seemed so perturbed by this episode, that Ann was forced to make light of it.

"It's nothing," she said, panting a little after her run. "I had only twenty-five francs in my bag. But what enraged me was the man's impudence."

"You ought not to have followed him," said Stephen, rather pale about the mouth. "Good God, what might not have happened to you. These fellows always carry knives. You must never do a trick like that again, Ann. Let them take anything you have, rather. Promise me."

"Oh, very well," said Ann. "Only it is not likely to happen again."

Then they went back through the lemons and olive

trees, and as Stephen saw his wife stepping along the stony path with her light, sure footstep, head erect against the glorious noon, he suddenly remembered that scene on the shore at Wodenscar when she stood poised on the breakwater. It thrilled him to the heart to know that she, in all her young fearlessness, belonged to him.

The next day was the last of their enchanted fortnight, and they walked past rows of palm-trees that fluttered almost black upon the exceeding brilliance of sea and sky, towards the Italian frontier. It was half-past two, the time when the whole town drowsed, and at last they, too, felt the influence of the Southern afternoon. The long road was blank and dusty, while on the left stood an empty villa in a garden, so they entered and sat down on a stone seat in the shade. The hot silence of the afternoon was so intense that they could hear the exquisite little sound of the rose leaves falling on the stone seat as they sat there. The pink-washed walls of the house were faded to the softest rose-colour, and glimmered through the green leaves of the over-grown garden. The legend, "Villa Rose," "À louer ou à vendre" showed half obliterated on a board close at hand which was already overgrown with roses.

There are few birds here, and none sang in that dreaming stillness as the married lovers sat hand in hand, absolutely content.

They heard a church clock clang out three o'clock—three o'clock of a southern afternoon—and the air vibrated to its drowsy suggestion of love and joy and summer, then fell once more asleep.

Stephen and Ann slept too, he leaning back against

the high back of the stone seat, she with her head pillowed on his shoulder, and the rose leaves falling upon them.

At last one touched Ann's lips and she awoke, and her movement awakened him.

"We've been asleep," was all Stephen said, but it seemed to both of them the most exquisite and touching thing that they should fall asleep so, in the summer afternoon, in each other's arms.

Then they heard the clock strike four, so Ann stood up and shook the rose-petals from her hair, and put on her hat.

"It's no use, Stephen," she said. "We've got to go back to the hotel, and have tea, and pack our things for leaving to-morrow. This is the end of our honeymoon."

"No, no, Ann. There won't be any end," he protested. "But I'm like you—I don't relish the thought of the brickfield, and the terrace——"

"Don't!" cried Ann. "I can't bear it!" She sat down again on the stone bench and covered her face with her hands as if to shut out the whole picture of grey, wind-swept Wodenscar and their future life there. "Stephen! I feel I can't go back to—everything! Getting that little house ready! And finding a general servant—I can't!"

"But we were lucky to get a house in the terrace," he said anxiously. "Those are quite the best cheap houses in Wodenscar. And there is always a demand for them. We should have missed it if we had not wired from here. It was most lucky for us that Miss Linskill's relatives kept it on after quarter day."

"Oh! I knew!" interrupted Ann. "And I am thankful! But I do wish we could take the Villa Rose and live here without any worries for ever. I can't help dreading it all."

"My poor little girl! I don't wonder," he said soothingly, seating himself beside her in the same place as before—but there was an immense difference all the same. They had indeed, as Ann said, reached the end of the honeymoon, and it was neither the bridegroom, nor the lover, but the husband who sat there, reasoning and consoling.

She jumped up, finally, ashamed of having allowed him to see her misgivings, and said gaily enough—

"That's what comes of falling asleep after veal cutlets and iced lemonade—you awake filled with apprehensions, of course. I've heard father say scores of times that our worst fears come from the inside and not from the outside. We think it's hovering fate, and it's a morsel of undigested fat. That's what's happened to me." She pulled him up from the seat. "Come on, Stephen. Hey, for England, home and duty—and whatever we do we must not forget to take a box of crystallized fruits for Mrs. Walker. Now, a last look at the Villa Rose and then—Good-bye!"

But the home things, once having found an opening, pressed in upon them, and Stephen said abruptly, after an interval of silence—

"Barrington has never replied to your letter."

"No," said Ann, startled. "I hardly expected it. His pride would be so terribly hurt that he would want to drop me and all my concerns out of sight as soon as possible."

"I thought Mrs. Barrington might have written a line."

"What could she say? And, besides, I hear she has been ill again. She is away in some nursing home in Bath."

"Is"—Stephen kicked a stone with his foot—"is Barrington away, too, do you know?"

"Yes. I heard from Mrs. Walker." She paused. "Stephen, you can read all my letters if you like, you know."

"No, no. That's like—like having to do without a dressing-room. We won't make our marriage into that kind of thing if we can help it, Ann, though we are going to live in the terrace."

Then they laughed together, and the mental atmosphere grew clear again, permitting them to pack in excellent spirits, and to enjoy the beauty of that last moonlit night, when they set their bedroom window wide open and looked out at the palm-trees standing motionless against the translucent sky, and the sheen of the olives, and the wonder of the glimmering sea beyond.

Next morning Ann was slipping her tooth-brush into the case when she paused and stood with it in her hand, seeing once more the first night of their marriage. For this necessary article of the toilet was connected with one of those ridiculous incidents which happen in every romance, and which every one keeps secret. Ann had unpacked at Dover to find herself without a tooth-brush, so she told her new husband, and they went out into the dark, windy streets smelling of the sea and ships, and knocked up an old chemist, who came to his side door holding a lamp above his

head, very much annoyed to have been disturbed for such a trivial purpose.

Ann could see it all now, quite clearly—the old man grudgingly handing over the tooth-brush to them as they stood flushed and laughing in the wind.

Then they raced back through the wind and darkness to the sound of the wild sea booming on the pier, with that in their hearts which the good gods give, upon their wedding night, to a girl and a man who love each other.

Ann was still staring at the tooth-brush when Stephen came into the room, and she held it up to him, saying gaily—

“Do you remember?”

“Remember!”

They stood so, clasped together, until the porter thundered at the door. Then the baggage was taken out, and, instead of turning for a last look at the string-and-paper-strewn room as they had meant to do, they were preoccupied about Ann's hat-box, which tottered uneasily on the top of the heap. They entered the hotel omnibus, the very air of which was stale with the comings and goings of people to whom change had become monotony, and they went past the palms and flowers for the last time, making sure that Cook's tickets were at hand, and wondering how much they ought to give the hotel porter who accompanied them.

Once in the train the enchantment returned for a time as they went slowly past such gardens of roses and heliotropes as exist nowhere else in the world—Monte Carlo—Nice—Cannes—Boileau—all set about with pink and gold and crimson flowers which had

come out in their greatest splendour now that the season was over and the sunny land belonged to them.

A pleasant Frenchwoman travelled with them from Avignon, and when she said, à propos of the difficult subject of ventilation, that she had heard some English people slept with windows open, it was as if she had half credited a rumour that some English people wore blue noses.

A night in Marseilles, in an apartment like a banqueting hall with two small beds lost in the vastness of it—a run through the plains of France—a breezy crossing—and at last they stood on the familiar, grimy platform of the Great Northern Railway station.

As they passed along the train searching for a seat, Ann was abruptly taken back to the old life at the Red Grange and a set of circumstances which she had almost thought forgotten. For Mr. Bagshaw leaned from a carriage window and beckoned to them.

“I suppose you’ve heard? You’ll be going down for it?” he said solemnly, moving his head a little from side to side in the aperture of window.

“No! What?” said Ann, startled.

“Then you have not heard that Mrs. Barrington died two days ago at Bath, and is to be buried tomorrow at Wodenscar?”

“Oh! I’m so sorry—so sorry!”

Ann stood there, keeping back her tears, and feeling that the honeymoon was indeed over. Life with its sad realities was meeting her here, even before she got back to Wodenscar.

“She’s been a good woman,” said Stephen at last.

“Indeed—indeed she has,” said Ann, thinking of

that strange day when Mrs. Barrington so wonderfully waited for death.

"A good woman," repeated Bagshaw in all sincerity. "Yes, yes. That's it. A good woman!"

There was a little, bleak silence, through which an engine screamed, after they had laid that tribute beside the memory of the dead—the best tribute which can be offered to any of us.

Then Bagshaw wagged his head once more and sat down in his corner, while Stephen and Ann found places in the next compartment. As they rushed along the familiar line between London and Peterborough, they sat silent, each preoccupied with their own thoughts. A baby of three ran in and out of the corridor. The spring wind bit shrewdly after the warmth of the Riviera in May.

"Oh, that child!" exclaimed Ann.

"Don't you like children, dear?"

"No. Detest 'em," said Ann irritably. "Margaret was always the one for children."

So the train slipped on towards Grantham, where there was the usual desultory collection of people, who looked as if they were going nowhere—and then on again through the cool, green fields and blossoming hedgerows.

"Ann," said Stephen in a low voice, "if you'd been marrying Barrington, you'd have had it all now—the money, and the place and everything."

"I was not thinking of that," said Ann quickly. "I was only thinking about Mrs. Barrington, herself."

"But it's true, all the same."

"Who cares if it is!" said Ann. "I wouldn't exchange the fortnight we have just had for all the

money in the world and—and Buckingham Palace! Not that Buckingham Palace is a house I should ever want to live in—should you?”

“I’ll wait till I’m asked,” laughed Stephen, throwing off his depression. “Oh, Ann, you’re right; it has been perfectly glorious, and nothing can take it away from us.”

“No, Stephen, nothing,” responded Ann.

So the honeymoon ended, after all, on that high note; they had gained something from life which neither time nor death could take away from them.

CHAPTER XV

THE TERRACE AGAIN

IT was still daylight on a cold evening with a wind blowing from the sea when Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Finlay walked, preceded by a cabman with a Gladstone bag, down the terrace through which they had crept in the darkness-before-dawn of that wonderful morning just three weeks ago. A few heads were craned from doors and windows as they passed, but most of the visitors in the little gardens received them with the blank indifference of town-dwellers on a seaside holiday. The wallflowers which had given out such mystic fragrance were now common wallflowers, rather wilted and dust-laden. The terrace itself seemed to have grown smaller and meaner in their absence, and across the whitewashed windows of their future home the legend, "Let by Long, the House Agent," was scrawled in fat, uneven characters.

But in spite of all this, Stephen and Ann wore that jubilantly self-conscious air which clings to happy honeymooners like burrs to those who have been through a thicket; and Mrs. Walker, watching from her gate, felt satisfied.

She received them with a little coyness, in attire somehow faintly reminiscent of bridesmaids, but her quick glance at Ann asked the inevitable question which one woman tries to appear not to ask another on the return from the honeymoon.

“ Well, how’s marriage? ”

“ Glorious! ” answered Ann’s happy eyes, before she had time to turn them away.

Then they spoke, as they were bound to do, of Mrs. Barrington’s death, and it was in the shadow of that remembrance that they gathered, all three of them, round the table which Mrs. Walker had made bridal with white paper hydrangeas and the wedding-cake sent by Ann’s stepmother.

There was a good deal of constraint at first, until Mrs. Walker cleared the air by saying, with jaunty downrightiness, “ Well, you can’t either of you go to the funeral—that would be adding insult to injury, if you’ll excuse my putting it so; you can’t bring the poor lady back either. And you’ll only be coming home from your honeymoon once in your lives. I should make an occasion of it—I should indeed.”

And as it seemed inhuman to continue depressed in face of the trophy of white-paper flowers, they endeavoured to appear festive, and succeeded in banishing a little the strangeness and reaction of this home-coming. The world was still the glorious place it had been at Mentone, and a lifetime of happy love spread out before them.

At the conclusion of the meal Ann cut the cake, which was accompanied by messages from home, and in the rather emotional atmosphere thus engendered Mrs. Walker led the bride upstairs.

“ You never thought,” she giggled, “ to order another bedstead, and yours only a little one, six foot by four, so I ordered a new one on my own—it will come in for my room afterwards—I understand it is

all the fashion for married couples to have separate beds, and I must say I like to keep up to date."

"How good of you!" said Ann vaguely; and Mrs. Walker advanced to smooth the red flowers on the new counterpane, looking across the bed with eyes which were all womanly and kind.

"I do hope you'll be happy," she said. "Some people blame you and some admire you. But it's all over now, and that's neither here nor there. Only—as you make your bed, so you must lie on it. And if there are any lumps——"

"Well, what must I do then?" laughed Ann across the roses.

"Do!" flashed back Mrs. Walker. "Why, turn over and forget 'em if you can—if not, pretend you like 'em. Same as I do. Same as all women do."

Ann laughed again; she was not anticipating any lumps; and Mrs. Walker went away. After a little while Stephen came upstairs to bed. He stood a moment at the door, then closed it and entered the room.

"What were you thinking of?" said Ann, looking up from her unpacking.

He came and kneeled beside her.

"I was thinking, my wife," he said, "of the nights when I was on the other side of the wall."

"Did you want to talk to me?"

He put his arms about her shoulders and shook her gently.

"You—you girl!" he said. "Did you imagine that I was made of wood, that you could show me the way to your window and then expect me to forget it! Why, I thought of it night after night as I sat there

alone on the other side of the wall. And once I longed so desperately to open your window and say 'Good-night' that I crept out upon the parapet of the door. Then I realized, of course, the utter folly of such a thing." He held her closer. "What should you have done if I had come?"

Ann laughed once more. She was so happy that laughter came easily.

"Oh, I don't know! Called Mrs. Walker! Given you in charge of the police!"

But she felt his arms stiffen and he moved away from her, though he only said lightly—

"What a Diana!"

"Now, Stephen," she said, instantly serious, "let's have this out together, once and for all."

"What? My word, Ann, I am tired!"

"This subject of your imprisonment. There, you wince at the mention of it now. And you must not, Stephen." She put her hand in his. "Face the thing. You killed a man accidentally. You spent two years in prison for it. Well, that's past and done with. We won't wonder when we meet any one if they know or not—they're sure to know—they're welcome to know—everybody knows! On that basis we'll start afresh; we'll stop jibbing like a nervous horse every time we come within sight of the subject. We won't care. We'll go past it, and past it, looking right at it, until we *don't* care!"

She paused, very pale with fatigue and emotion, but with something in her face that had never been there before. She had, through her love, reached something for him which she had so far failed to reach for herself.

"I always fancied I'd been fairly plucky," said Stephen. "I—I never complained to any one at all but you, Ann. I thought I'd borne it pretty well."

"You did, you did!" she cried. "But that's just it. You were brave to bear—I want you not to bear it—to throw it off—to *make* it not matter!"

They stood facing each other in the candle-light, tense, almost like enemies.

"That sounds as if I'd been a sort of coward," said Stephen. "Do you think so?"

There was a silence, and by the length of that silence could be measured the depth of Ann's love. She longed, more than she had ever longed for anything in her life, to call out "No!" And yet she did not.

Then, seeing his white, hurt face, she could bear the sight no longer, and flung herself on his breast so that it was hidden from her.

"Stephen! Stephen!" she sobbed. "You couldn't help it. Somebody said—somebody said that only love and suffering could give courage of soul. You had all the suffering and none of the love, dear."

But he stood erect, not touching her.

"You think that of me!" he said. "That's what you have been thinking of me all the time."

"I never thought at all. It came, because I loved you so," she whispered. "And I had to tell you to-night and spoil our coming home, or I never could have done. I knew, somehow, that it was my last chance."

Instinct had impelled her to seize on this opportunity when they were keyed up to a high emotional pitch and had not settled down to the routine of their

daily life together; still, she now regretted having spoken, and turned wearily to the glass to unfasten her hair, all the fire gone out of her.

But as she was putting down the last hairpin, he came up behind her and put his hand on hers.

"It's true," he said in a low voice. "I hated it because it was true."

"And you almost hated me?" She hardly breathed the words, searching his face with her eyes.

"Yes; almost that," he said.

Then they clung together as those do who have just passed through some terrible and great danger.

However, the days following this episode were so filled with soap and soda and furniture polish that the newly married pair had no time to brood over the nearness of their escape from shipwreck on one of those rocks which all must encounter who put forth upon the matrimonial sea. The actual labour of getting this little home ready left Ann and Mrs. Walker, with Stephen after business hours, so healthily tired that the demands of the body filled their entire horizon.

But at last it was all finished, the cheapish furniture shining in gimcrack sprightliness against the grey wallpapers which the landlord had put on to dissipate the sad memory of Miss Linskill, and the very hearth-brushes of a virgin cleanliness and newness.

The evening upon which they entered into residence was chilly—with the long-drawn-out, grey chilliness of such evenings in Wodenscar—but they forbore to light a fire an hour or two, because of soiling the newly polished grate. And as they sat shivering amid immaculate tidiness before their cold hearth-stone,

they heard the lucky maid energetically stirring the kitchen fire.

"If she'd only go to bed, so that we could have a warm," said Ann, laughing ruefully as she chafed her fingers.

"Oh, not she! She's going to make a night of it," said Stephen, thumping his chest like an old-fashioned cabman.

At last, however, the little maid, who was only little by courtesy, made her elephantine way upstairs, leaving her employers to creep conspirator-like into the tiny kitchen.

It was rosy-lighted by the fire, and they crouched together on the broad fender, which was the wedding gift of Mrs. Walker, and more calculated to stand strain than anything else at Number Five, Sea-view Terrace.

"Well, this is our house-warming," said Ann. "We must drink our healths. Let us make some cocoa."

So they boiled milk and concocted the brown fluid which Stephen loathed; then, calling gaily, "Here's to the happy householders! Long life and happiness to us both!" they drank right down to the sugary, grainy residue.

But no people in all the palaces of the world that night raised the goblet with a surer faith in a happy future than these two young people before their kitchen fire.

During this time, as often happens to the newly married, the things and people which had been of paramount interest to Ann before her marriage seemed

to slip below her horizon. Her mind's eye simply did not see the old life at Wodenscar with the comings and goings to and from the Red Grange, and all that had arisen from such a set of circumstances. Even her love-affair with Captain Barrington seemed a shadowy thing, without any more importance, or effect on her present existence, than the measles she had experienced at thirteen.

What had become of real importance was the new crockery which the little maid daily sacrificed, and the incessant piano-playing of the people next door—and behind those, never really obscured or forgotten, her love for Stephen.

So the round of her days was set to a sort of mild domestic melody, and the evenings, when Stephen came home, to a clear, fine music as natural as the music of the birds, and, after a while, just so subconsciously a source of joy.

Then one night came a chord crashing through it.

“Barrington's in Wodenscar.”

“For how long?”

“Only a few days. He is having extensive alterations made to the house, and won't settle down there until next year.”

“Oh, well——” Ann rose from the table. “Did you see him?”

“Yes; just in passing.”

Ann hesitated.

“How did he look?” she said.

“Oh, all right. Bit worn. His aunt's death, and so on——”

“Of course,” said Ann. “Well, a long foreign trip will be the best thing for him.”

Stephen rose, too, and stood with his back to her, looking out of the window.

“What shall you do if you see him?” he said.

“Oh!” Ann stood arrested, with a cake-dish in her hand. “Oh, I am not likely to see him.” She paused. “Coming out for a walk, Stephen?” and so dismissed the subject.

But not from her mind. The Red Grange, and the strange influences which might or might not be imaginary, and the tales which still lived in the cramped streets of old Wodenscar—these became visible once more above the horizon, all the more coloured and vivid in contrast to the foreground of her life now.

However, she did not see Captain Barrington during his few days’ stay at the inn in the town, and the blank, noisy brightness of hot August days went by with swift monotony. Children screamed and ran in the terrace; fat ladies wandered jelly-wise from bathing-tent to sea, clad principally, and sufficiently, in the panoply of their own virtue. The pierrots were now Musical Midshipmites, and a robust young woman with a great deal of neck, in something dashingly nautical, had taken the place of the tired pierrette.

During the blazing afternoons ladies came to call upon Ann—villa residents who were rather interested in a girl once nearly married to Captain Barrington, though they would always believe that he never meant it—the doctor’s wife, very kind, but a little tired, naturally, of keeping up with all the births, marriages and deaths in Wodenscar—the rector, with a niece who said that she thought the Red Grange would make an excellent Inebriates’ Home.

“Inebriates’ Home! Not unless they want old

Courtenay to haunt the inebriates and finish them off," laughed the rector. Then he looked across seriously at Ann, and ignored what he had heard of her altogether, as he had learned to do in thirty years of Wodenscar. "You would be grieved by Mrs. Barington's death," he said simply. "I miss her very greatly. I fear that my judgment was rather obscured during her lifetime by her little eccentricities. But I have come to feel that she was, in her way, a great woman."

"Great! How very interesting!" said the niece, glancing about her; not that she wanted to see anything, but because it had become a habit, when she was bored, to say 'How very interesting!' and glance round the room.

And with that they rose to go, the niece pausing to say at the door, "We are expecting the United Mothers to tea on Friday next—could you come on that day? Then we are sure to be at home."

"Thank you. I shall enjoy meeting the United Mothers," said Ann, with a smile in which there was no malice.

Thus the incident closed, seeming to mean nothing, and yet indicating Ann's position in the society about her with absolute clearness and definiteness.

But social considerations troubled Ann very little and Stephen not at all, while the term 'married bliss' was scarcely an exaggerated description of their state at this time. So when, one Sunday morning, they received an invitation to visit Stephen's father and mother, they went gaily to service through streets which were indeed filled with 'visitors' in pink and

white and blue and yellow, but which seemed to them like the flowery aisles in some enchanted garden.

A week later they motored up to the fine suburban house of Mr. Finlay, senior, and as Ann saw the family group in the doorway, she murmured to her husband—

“It only wanted this!”

She already saw her father-in-law falling in love with her and her invalid mother-in-law weeping on her shoulder, while the sister and brothers stood round, invoking blessings on the head of the charming creature who had restored Stephen to his proper place in the family.

None of this happened as yet, however, and the eldest son, a self-satisfied little man with a red jowl and a tight collar who had met them at the railway station, ushered them up the steps with a rather pompous—

“Father, here are Stephen and his wife.”

Mr. Finlay, an older edition of his eldest son, stepped forward from the group and said with conscious handsomeness—

“Welcome home, Stephen. So this is our new daughter.”

Ann felt the touch of a bristling chin, and the party passed through the large, rather dark hall into the drawing-room. At the door they paused for a moment, and Gertrude Finlay, the daughter, said in a hushed voice, as if she were just outside a church: “Please be careful with mother, Stephen. We are a little afraid of the effect it may have on her.”

It was for ever after an annoyance to Ann to remember that her boots mysteriously started creaking

at that moment, and that she could think of nothing but the agonizing noise they made in the sacred stillness of that thickly carpeted room, as she made her way across to the sofa where lay a plump, pink, most expensively dressed invalid.

Mrs. Finlay closed her eyes and extended one hand. Ann took the limp, cushioned fingers and kissed them gently, whereupon Mrs. Finlay opened her eyes. She was, to a certain, limited extent, satisfied with her daughter-in-law. Her important status as an invalid and an afflicted mother had been at once recognized.

"Stephen's wife!" she said, drawing Ann nearer. "Well, I hope—I do hope that you may be happy!"

She had plainly, however, so little expectation of it that Mr. Finlay was moved to say pompously, "We'll all regard this as a new beginning, Stephen. I trust now that you may have a useful and prosperous life."

Then tea was brought in, and Gertrude Finlay poured it out from a very handsome tea equipage, while Ann so exerted herself to be charming that the elder brother became stodgily gallant within the discreetest of limits, and Mrs. Finlay, protesting feebly that she could take nothing, allowed herself to absorb three hot tea-cakes soaked in butter.

Stephen remained very quiet, happily observant of Ann's nervous charm and prettiness, and glad, in a sense, to be here at home again. But he had been pushed too abruptly outside ever to come back as they thought he was doing, for a man who has once been made a stranger in his own home remains one, and there was no forgetting those frigid, terrible days which he had spent here immediately after his release from prison.

But Ann now understood, in spite of her intense loyalty to her husband, how terrible such an experience must have been to this narrow-minded provincial family, priding itself on a rectitude which could not possibly be assailed. It would be impossible for any one living in the outer world to realize the agony which the Finlays suffered at the time of his trial, not on account of what their son and brother was suffering so much as because of what they supposed their neighbours were saying.

So, with all this in the air, it followed that neither Stephen nor Ann felt very sorry when Monday arrived, and they were free to leave the thickly carpeted and spacious house for their own modest residence.

"It's good to be back again," said Ann that evening, beaming across cold ham and lettuce. "Do you think I was all right, Stephen?"

"Of course you were. You always are!"

"Rubbish!" said Ann. Still she believed, all the same, that she had made a conquest of Stephen's family, and smiled to herself in confident anticipation of future favours.

But when several weeks passed and the fact became gradually clear that the Finlays had simply done their duty and left it at that, Ann's glowing impression of her visit faded; she became sore at the recollection of her wasted efforts to charm her husband's family, and avoided speaking of them.

This was the easier because Stephen grew daily more engrossed in the brick factory, where his dogged perseverance and great ability were at last beginning to make headway against past mismanagement and his own inexperience. He toiled early and late, strained

by that sensation of pushing and pushing, and never feeling the load move, which every man knows who has worked up a decaying business.

Very often when he came home at night he was almost too tired to talk, but his worn, clean-cut face always shone with a sort of inner joy as he caught sight of Ann watching for him. Then he would kiss her, and though he never knew it, nor did she, the eager question of his inner soul was always answered by a radiant negative.

"Do you regret it?"

"Never!"

But one night Stephen came home to find Ann's looks clouded and her tongue bitter. He was more than usually tired, and sat with his head throbbing painfully while she told of the delinquencies of Maud, and the terrible 'visitors' next door who played tunes all day on a worn-out gramophone, and the mark which a tea-cup had made on one of the new, shiny tables.

"Oh," he said at last, "I do wish to goodness, Ann, that you would not make mountains out of mole-hills."

"I don't!" gasped Ann, feeling as a god might, after ages of worship, at whom the first hand threw mud.

"Oh, well, have it so!" he said, rising abruptly and going out.

She sat down and looked at her wedding-ring. So it was irrevocable. She had given up every ambition in life for a man who could speak to her like that. The room went dark and began to close in upon her. Then the odd darkness gradually cleared and the walls resumed their normal position.

But she had reached the difficult point in married life when a woman is forced to realize that there is a difference between a husband and a lover. Some pass over it without noticing, many begin to look for imperfections on the other side and soon see nothing else, most pull up with a start and afterwards go on cheerily, knowing things must be so—but none enjoy the experience at the moment.

Ann, being not without common sense, first wept to think her beloved should find a flaw in her, and then went out into the kitchen to see if Maud was frying the fish properly. A cup of tea restored Stephen to a deeply contrite frame of mind, and though Ann had thought the world at an end at half-past six, she saw a comparatively happy future before her at eight o'clock.

It was August now, and they sat after supper in the dusky square of their open bow window, with the unlighted room behind them. All the faint sounds of a little place making holiday mingled together and were harmonized by the booming of the quiet waves on the shore. Mrs. Walker fluttered out of her door in summery lightness and stood by the front gate adjusting a jabot.

“Beautiful night,” she said. “I wonder where my good gentleman is by now. Seems like a dream—having him for a fortnight, and then him going again. If it wasn't for the marks he's made with his pipe on the new paint of my front-room mantelpiece, I should almost think it *was* a dream. But they're there to aggravate me every time I set eyes on them.” She sighed a tribute to hymeneal joys, then added briskly, “Well, things are quiet, aren't they? And when you

first came something was always happening. I got to think you were the sort of person that would always be in the throng—if you know what I mean, Mrs. Finlay? But you've settled down."

"Yes—nothing more to happen now!" laughed Ann.

"Oh, it's only when you've settled down that the other sort of things begin to happen, you know. Good-night."

She fitted away again, while Stephen said idly, puffing at his pipe—

"Silly old josser! What does she mean?"

"Oh," said Ann, then stopped short. "I suppose," she continued after a pause, "when you settle down you begin to look for adventures of the spirit. Is that it?"

"Well, Mrs. Walker didn't mean that, I'm sure," said Finlay.

Ann crept closer to her husband's side in the darkness and put her hand in his.

"Anyway, Stephen," she said, "I'm going to have a sort of adventure—a great adventure."

"What!" He sat up, very straight, grasping her hand tightly. "You mean——"

"Yes, dear." Then she began sobbing helplessly, and he slammed down the window, for there is not even privacy to weep in the terrace, unless it be guarded.

"You're sorry, Ann?" he whispered.

"Yes. I hate it! I hate it!"

"You're afraid? My poor little wife!"

"No, no; it's not that."

"Dearest, don't you want to have a child of mine?" he said very tenderly.

"I don't want to have one at all. I hate it!" she repeated, still sobbing.

He waited until she was calmer and then fetched her a glass of hot milk, giving it to her sip by sip as if she had been a child. His very being overflowed with tenderness for her.

"Ann, to think I was such a brute to you at supper-time!" he said. "Can you ever forgive me?"

"I am the one to blame," said Ann. "I saw you were worn out, and yet I went on venting my irritability on you. But it has been awful, keeping it all to myself—and yet I hoped against hope. I don't mind so much now, you know."

"But you will be happy when you get used to the idea," he said anxiously.

She looked at his tired face under the gaslight and forced herself to smile.

"I'll try," she said. "Don't you worry, Stephen!"

CHAPTER XVI

EVERY DAY

THERE is, indeed, one miracle of nature which scarcely ever fails, and of course Ann's baby brought love with it from that shadowy place where little souls wait until their mothers call them.

The child was born on a windy March morning before daylight. Now it was all over, and Ann lay with her daughter by her side, in that wonderful beatitude which comes to women after their time of suffering.

The room was very quiet—the low voices of Stephen and Dr. Middleton and Dr. Grey hummed in the room below, soothing her to a sense of absolute security. The nurse moved softly to and fro, and there was a pleasant scent of orris-root from the flounced, be-ribboned basket which Margaret had sent her. A beautiful cot, the gift of the Finlays, stood in the corner of the room, and a flowered eider-down from her stepmother lay across her own feet. She wore a dressing-jacket embroidered by Mrs. Walker.

She seemed to herself, lying there, to be surrounded by love, and because she was weak the tears came to her eyes as she looked from one pretty gift to another.

Then the nurse turned out the gas and drew up the blind so that Ann saw the windows covered with sea-spray, and through them the sunrise.

It was flaming angrily over the sea on that rough morning, but the clouds which Ann saw from her pil-

low through the sea-spray had a sort of misty radiance.

She lay idly gazing, not wishing to speak or move. Life was such a wonderful, wonderful thing as she saw it then, looking across that misty sea of rose-colour. And nothing really mattered but love—she knew now—nothing but how much people loved you.

She glanced across at her baby and then out of the window again; the rose-coloured haze had died away, and there was now only a faint goldy shine from the early morning through the spray on the windows.

And as Ann lay watching, a little thought drifted to her out of the unknown—she certainly was not strong enough to think it.

Something mattered more still—how much you loved other people.

Then she went to sleep.

The arrival of this baby inhabitant was an event of importance to the terrace, where there had been for some time a vague impression that such things were accidents which only happened to unsatisfactory maid-servants.

Baby 'visitors,' of course, were plentiful as gooseberries in late June and as lightly considered, but this one belonged by right, and the terrace rejoiced with Ann, feeling that something rather clever had been accomplished.

Even old Mr. Clarke, from the end house near the sea, brought round, as an appropriate gift, a jar of pickled cauliflower of his own making, feeling that he was 'in it,' while Mrs. Walker bustled up and down the terrace answering questions with authority and generally behaving as if, though she had not had a

baby, she had been intimately concerned in the affair.

Every one sent or went to inquire, and Maud the maid came importantly to the door many times in a morning, while housewives, already deep in spring cleaning, managed to make a custard or a jelly shape for 'young Mrs. Finlay.'

Stephen went about in a glow of pride and happiness, greeting fat fathers whom he met in the way of business from the standpoint of a family man, and taking counsel with his foreman, the father of eleven, on the subject of infant insomnia.

"Strange thing," he said, scratching his chin, "that our poor little girl seems unable to get a really consecutive night's rest, Dawson. I can't think that she can be well to cry in that heart-rending manner, though I do not wish to make Mrs. Finlay anxious by saying much about it."

"They're often like that," consoled the foreman. "Some does and some doesn't."

"But I can't understand why an infant should cry at night. It's not natural. There must be some natural means of preventing it."

"Well, sir, you find 'em—and you can give up brick-making to-morrow," said the foreman. "Bless my soul, you won't hear it by the time you have five or six."

Stephen pressed a hand to his throbbing head—they were going over accounts in the office—and said emphatically—

"I should hear it if I were under chloroform."

This peculiarity of Miss Barbara Finlay, loving as she appeared in other respects, was also fast cooling the welcome with which the terrace had received her.

Through the open window her cries rang out until they sometimes aroused old Mr. Clarke at the end house, and made him wish to withdraw the pickles, while Mrs. Markham next door solved the question finally by going to bed with cotton-wool in her ears.

However, that phase passed, and high summer made easy times for babies in Wodenscar, who slept in the pleasantly tempered sunshine before front doors and in little back-gardens, where they grew big and lusty and shining-haired in the fine air.

So Barbara ceased to trouble the terrace at night and became once more popular, receiving pats and pokes and words of gushing endearment which she acknowledged with gravity, only condescending to smile at her gollywog and old Mr. Clarke. No one can fathom the inarticulate infant mind, but there is every reason to believe that she considered them members of the same charming family—the only one in her circle worth cultivating.

In these days Stephen worked harder than ever, for he felt that obstinate leaden weight at which he had pushed so long begin to give at last—it moved a very little—he must put his whole soul into the business lest it should fall back again.

Ann saw the effort he was making, and this prevented her from asking him to increase the weekly housekeeping allowance, though she found it to be quite insufficient for their present needs. She knew perfectly well that he would give her more if he had it, but he only kept a very small amount for his own personal expenditure as it was, so she made up the deficiency, as far as she could, with her own small income of seventy pounds a year.

One night, however, things reached a climax. Maud had given notice. The boiler leaked. The milk-warmer was broken and she had no money to buy another. This was Wednesday, and only one-and-three remained of the housekeeping money to last until the following Monday.

She sat down after supper, tired out, and said rather sharply—

“It’s no good, Stephen. I must have some more money. I’ve tried my best, but I can’t manage.”

He flushed crimson and thrust his hand in his pocket, drawing out all he had.

“Ann!” he said, desperately concerned. “Why didn’t you tell me before? Of course, you must have what you need. Here is five pounds. Will that do to go on with?”

“Of course, it will,” said Ann. “I ought to have spoken before, but I didn’t want to worry you.” She paused and added, biting her lip, “I—I—you believe I did try, Stephen?”

“Dearest—I know you did,” he said. “Oh, Ann, how I wish I could give you everything. You don’t suppose I have not watched you working, and contriving, and getting worn out——” He broke off, turning to the window.

She came up behind him and put her hand on his shoulder—a slender hand already a little roughened by work and stitching.

“Poor old Steve,” she whispered. “Never mind. You’ve given me happiness. No one can do more than that, can they?”

“Then you don’t regret? You’ve never regretted?” he said fiercely, drawing her to him.

"Never! Never once!" she answered.

So they clung together for a moment with tears in their eyes, and then Ann glanced at the clock; it was time to go and feed the baby.

When she came downstairs Stephen was writing a letter, which he hastily pushed into his writing-pad and left there. Ann thought no more about it until the next morning, when she was dusting the writing-table, and came across the letter, which was half read before she realized that he must have meant to hide it from her.

She stood staring at it, her face pale, her lips trembling; and yet it was no missive to a lady falsely loved, but only the following—

"To Messrs. Beck, Tailors—

"DEAR SIRS,

"I find that I shall not after all require the serge suit which I ordered from you this morning, and therefore beg to countermand the order.

"I am, etc."

She put the letter down determined to say nothing about it, knowing that he would be grieved for her to have seen it; but the difficulties of the situation seemed to be almost overwhelming as she stood there listening to the faint 'Boom! Boom!' of the sea through the open window.

She could not write to her own people for money, because she would not so humiliate her husband after what had been said by them at the time of the wedding; and she knew that Mr. Finlay would give grudging five-pound notes occasionally if he were asked, but she found it impossible to ask him.

Life seemed a very difficult affair as she went through the kitchen, where the sulky Maud was rattling crockery.

“Baby asleep still?”

“I d’ know,” said Maud.

But Ann had learned the meekness of spirit which comes alone to housewives who must have cheap servants, and she walked out into the little garden without a word. The washing of the visitors next door was ballooning cheerily over the wall, and little Barbara lay smiling like a cherub at a pair of mammoth undergarments in red flannel. It has to be owned that she showed a taste for the grotesque in spite of her angelic outline.

Ann stood still for a moment, smiling down at her little girl. Hope flowed back to her, as she inhaled the keen saltness of the breeze. When Barbara grew bigger and Stephen got on in his business—then she would be happy.

From that time she began to turn her eyes away from her present difficulties and to look across them at the distant future. She even overlooked her present joys, because her gaze was so persistently bent upon the horizon. She learned to bear her life by looking away from its unpleasantnesses, not from facing them. And so the days and weeks and months slipped by until Barbara was two years old, with only such landmarks as croup, and new maids, and a chimney blowing down, to mark the flight of time.

Ann had long given up the attempt to keep a nursemaid, and joined the daily stream of mothers who trudged, gaily enough, along the streets of Wodenscar, pushing mail-carts or perambulators. Pram-boolers,

such ladies are called in this vicinity, and young girls scoff at the idea of joining this honourable company; then come in the end to find themselves happily enough free of it, comparing fat limbs and giving medical advice.

But it has to be owned that Ann never acquired the slow, ruminant trudge of the perfect pram-bowler, and she was apt to take the road, in spite of motor-cars, rather than follow the procession which made its peaceful way along the shady pavements beyond the town.

On a September afternoon she was thus walking rather swiftly through a light sea roke which veiled everything a few feet before her, and as she walked she thought deeply of Barbara's winter petticoats and the butcher's bill and the new overcoat which Stephen must have whatever happened. It is not too much to say that she had absolutely forgotten the existence of Barrington, when she looked up, hearing the sound of horse's hoofs near at hand, and saw him almost upon her.

He pulled back, causing the horse to stumble from the sudden jerk, and slipped down from the saddle.

"I am very sorry," he said, as he came towards her. "I fear the child has been a little startled."

Barbara indeed was rending the air with her cries while her mother bent over her, but it was plain enough that Barrington had not the slightest idea whom he addressed.

"I say, little chap," he said, approaching the pram with the old, pleasant swagger, so oddly and suddenly familiar to Ann. "Cheer up! I didn't run over you, you know."

Then Ann lifted her head from bending over the child, and turned her face towards him.

"Ann!" he said.

"Yes," she answered.

For a full minute they stood like that, quite silent; her face, pale and thinner than he had known it, peered at him anxiously through the mist, her damp hair straggled in loose wisps over her forehead, her badly-cut clothes were only made possible by the prettiness of her slim figure.

"I ought to say Mrs. Finlay, of course," he remarked at last.

"I suppose so," said Ann.

Then he suddenly smiled and held out his hand.

"You—you don't—— You have forgiven me!" said Ann, scarcely knowing whether to be sorry or glad.

"Yes," he said, still smiling. "I have actually forgiven you for finding another man more attractive than myself. I admit it did seem an incredible thing at first, though."

"Then you didn't really care—you can't know what a relief that is to my mind," said Ann.

"Is it?" he asked. And as Ann looked at him, troubled and questioning, he saw she was less changed than he had at first thought; in spite of marriage and motherhood, the something elusive and virginal in her which had always charmed him was still there. He dropped his jesting tone and became serious too.

"Well, if you want the truth," he said, "I was

knocked out of time altogether when I got your telegram. I'd—I'd had mad thoughts of coming after you, and tearing you out of Finlay's arms, but even then I'd a bit more pride than to persecute a woman who didn't want me. All the same, I—I went through hell, Ann—and that's all about it."

"It's no use saying I'm sorry you suffered," murmured Ann.

He smiled again.

"You're not sorry. You wouldn't be human if you wanted me not to suffer in losing you. But I'm quite cured now."

"Well! I'm glad of that," said Ann.

"Of course, you are! No really nice woman likes a man to go on being faithful to an unrequited affection all his life—and yet——"

He looked down at her, gay, smiling, knowing well enough of the existence of that 'and yet' in every woman's heart.

Ann flushed.

"I am glad! I hope you will marry some nice girl and settle down."

"No, no," he said, "I am growing old—that would be too much of an adventure."

"But—but—not surely so much so as—as some friendships?"

"It is very kind of you," he said, "to refer so delicately to the flowery paths of dalliance I am supposed to have trodden. And it is quite the proper thing, under the circumstances, for you to recommend me to marry. However, I do mean what I say—there's nothing in life so adventurous as marrying a young

girl, only a man doesn't realize that, fortunately, until he is a little old. And now," as Ann opened her lips, "for goodness' sake don't finish this improving interview by offering to be my sister."

"I never thought——" began Ann indignantly; then she broke off, suddenly realizing that nervousness was leading them both to talk unnaturally and foolishly. With a great effort she tried to force herself to be simple and straight.

"I behaved abominably to you," she said, "and I am very, very thankful that it has not in any way spoilt your life. You must believe that."

"I do believe it," he said, and as he spoke he realized that there was something more in Ann than he had ever found; this was the woman he always vaguely, instinctively felt she might grow into. And as he had been disarmed by seeing her, with pale face and shabby clothes, wheeling her own perambulator, so now the innate generosity of the man made him pay homage to this growth in her character, even though it had come through marriage with another man.

Perhaps, behind it all, there may have been other considerations, of which, however, he was not conscious; a slight sense of escape, that flapping of uncut wings which comes to a lorn bachelor at sight of the matrimonial cage, a knowledge that his will was the wind's will—and not a wife's.

Still, Ann once more became to him in this hour, behind her shabby perambulator, what she afterwards remained—the young girl in his life.

She shone star-like in her virginity about the pretty loves whom he had wooed—and still wooed—so gaily; and he sat by the fire in the great hall at the Red

Grange that night, thinking of her with a sort of vague regret which was not at all unpleasant.

Ann hurried a little as she neared home, for it was time to cook the evening meal against her husband's return, a task she could never now entrust to any of the incompetent maids who alone could be induced to come, single-handed and at a very small wage, to a house where there was a baby.

But as she bent over the frying-pan in the little kitchen, while the maid upstairs completed a belated toilette, she could not help thinking for a moment of the airy spaciousness of the fine old house which might have been her home. She longed, standing there amid the dull odours of fish and freshly-washed oil-cloth, for the sweet air that blows across flower-beds in the evening, and delicate clothing, and well-trained service—all the things that would have been hers had she married Arthur Barrington.

Not for one moment did she regret, but her soul felt sick at the sordid monotony of her daily life in this little house, where her love of luxury and ease was crucified all the day long.

She glanced at the clock, called the maid to watch the fish and ran to her accustomed place at the window, drying her hands as she went. Stephen was rather late, and in that little waiting time her whirling thoughts grew quieter; then came the click of the gate and his light, quick footstep on the garden path.

At that sound, so familiar and so dear, she forgot the fish and the oil-cloth and only remembered that her man was coming home to her after his hard day's work.

"Well? Anything happened?" he said; not that he expected anything to have happened, but because some such established formula grows of itself between almost all husbands and wives.

"Yes," she answered.

"Gladys given notice?" he said in a low voice, a little anxiously, with a glance at the kitchen door.

"No." She paused a moment. "I saw Arthur Barrington this afternoon."

"You didn't speak, of course?"

"Yes. He stopped. Stephen, he was very, very kind. He quite forgives me. He wants us all to be friends. It is really wonderful."

"It is—very wonderful indeed," said Stephen; then he placed his hat on the peg with unnecessary force.

"And he is going away again for the winter."

"Best thing he can do," Stephen said, frowning at the umbrellas.

Ann came up behind him and put her arm around his neck.

"You old silly!" she said. "I do believe you are jealous at this time of day. Barrington was much more generous, though he is the injured party."

Stephen smiled around at her, a little ruefully.

"I know I'm an idiot, Ann, but I can't help it. He so nearly had you, and he could have given you such a lot that I can't."

"Well!" Ann drew back from him and stood, gay, erect, laughing, in the narrow passage. "Well, do I *look* as if I'd ever wanted anything I hadn't got?"

His face cleared, and he smiled back at her as gaily.

“No! No! It’s splendid that you really enjoy managing this little house and making the best of things. I do believe you love bargaining and getting a penny lettuce for a halfpenny—it’s a sort of game—a utilitarian ‘beggar my neighbour.’ Isn’t that so?”

Ann laughed again and went back to the kitchen without replying. She knew, without being aware of her knowledge, that nothing in married life is so fatally indiscreet as for a wife to show herself to her husband undraped by his illusions.



CHAPTER XVII

LOSING AND FINDING

ANN did not see Barrington during the next few days, but on the Monday afternoon as she walked up towards the dairy farm with the week's housekeeping money still intact in her purse, it occurred to her, between intervals of calculating the smallest supply of milk compatible with justice to Barbara, that she might come across him.

The farm lay not far from the Red Grange, and when Ann reached the green lane leading to it, she sat down to rest, feeling tired from the walk after a long morning's house-work. She could see, from where she was, a field of late corn being cut on the edge of the little town. Pale sunshine and sea air and ripe corn altogether make a joy and sparkle in the world that drives away care like champagne, only there is no headache afterwards. Therefore, when Ann took out her purse and counted out the money for the milk-bill so as to make sure there was enough, she determined to order an extra pint a day after all, and hang the expense. Barbara should live in a land flowing with milk, at any rate, if not with honey, and should know later every joy in life that her mother had missed. Ann mused, smiling, over the future of her child, while she watched the delicate, pale gold of the corn against the blue-grey sky, and the old houses gathered round the church.



When at last she rose and walked on, rejoicing in the cool sunshine and the free spaces of the flat country with the sea beyond, she had an unusual sense of happiness and freedom.

The woman of the farm seemed also to be glad of the fine day, for she came out red-faced and jolly from her garden and gave Ann a rose.

Then blankness fell upon the day. The account was one pound one and nine; and the sovereign which should have been in the purse was missing.

"Oh, it's nothing! You'll find it," said the woman cheerily as Ann explained the circumstances. "I lost a brooch myself last week, and it turned up in the dustbin. I'm very lucky, I am. I always find things. Do you?"

Suddenly Ann remembered losing her ring, and how she waited all day while that monotonous refrain 'Will be suitably rewarded,' went up and down Wodenscar.

She turned and trudged back towards the fallen tree upon which she had been sitting in the lane. But the dim idea at the back of her mind did not crystallize into a thought. She only had a sort of groping sensation that there was something she did not realize yet—that suffering can perhaps be a reward.

Anyway, as she sought in the grass for that lost sovereign, she was far from believing that she was being rewarded at all, or ever would be; and when she thought of the effort she had made to keep the money intact for the milk bill, and how the maid's wages were due next week, and the butcher still ow-

ing, she sat down again after a long and fruitless search and wept.

It seems all very mean and paltry, no doubt, to those high souls that have not to concern themselves with such sordid details; but Ann has many sisters, and they know how she felt as she sat on the log, trying not to cry.

At last she put her handkerchief in her pocket and went down on her knees again to make a final attempt, parting every clump of grass in which the coin might be hidden. As she was thus employed, Barrington came down the road from the Red Grange, but failed to recognize the crouching figure until he was close upon her; and she was too much engrossed to trouble about passers-by. Even when she looked up and saw him, she only rose dispiritedly from her knees and wished him a casual good-day.

"What's the matter?" he said. "Lost something? Let me help you to find it."

"Oh, nothing of any importance. Only a sovereign," she answered, forcing herself to speak cheerfully. "What a lovely day, is it not?"

But she had forgotten the traces of tears about her eyes, and wondered why Barrington suddenly turned red all over his face, which had now regained its former, rather flrid, appearance.

As a matter of fact, he was greatly moved. It was just the sort of thing to touch his generous, material nature. Poor little woman! Poor little soul! She was actually so hard put to it that she was crying because she had lost a sovereign.

He knelt down also, forgetting his immaculate



LOSING AND FINDING . 259

trouser-knees, and groped among the rank grass and nettles, which actually ran together for a second, as if seen through a mist.

“Poor little girl—to think of her——”

“Hi!” he shouted suddenly, over-acting in his zeal and thus giving a whoop which might have announced the finding of a Kohinoor. “I’ve got it! I’ve got it! Under this leaf, here. Look!”

“Oh! Thank you very much,” said Ann rather grandly. “One always hates to lose money, even if it is only a small sum that does not matter.”

“Of course, one does,” said Barrington, looking at his boots. “Well, I’m off again to-morrow, so this is good-bye, but I shall call as soon as I come back, if I may.”

“Please do,” said Ann, and then they parted, she hurrying back to the dairy farm, where the jolly woman seemed as pleased as if she herself had found something.

After supper Stephen asked his wife to go for a little stroll by the sea, and as they went along together arm-in-arm, with the clean, fresh air blowing about them, Ann began to think of the time when Stephen found her on the cliff. It may be that her meeting with Barrington had revived half-sleeping memories of those more adventurous days, and she said, somewhat sentimentally, gazing at the lighthouse star that shone out across the shadowy water—

“Stephen, wasn’t it wonderful—your finding me on the cliff like that?”

He puffed comfortably at his pipe.

“Well, I don’t know—Mrs. Walker sent me.”

But Ann, on such a night, could not agree.

"I think it was Fate," she said solemnly. "I like to think so."

"Oh!" he laughed, pausing for another puff, "I'm quite satisfied with the old Walker."

For husbands are like that—however much they love. Ann, however, went on gazing at the lighthouse star and vaguely wishing she could be a girl again, as well as married; for wives are like that, too, however happy.

On the next night Stephen went for a walk alone, for Barbara remained wakeful and her mother could not leave the house. It was already ten o'clock when he started, and as Ann heard his footsteps die away down the terrace, she guessed that he felt worried about his business matters and intended to walk off the day's discouragement and fatigue by one of the long night tramps which he used to take before they were married. So she went to bed and tried to sleep, because she knew he would rather not find her waiting up for him.

But she, too, was restless with fatigue, and that wheel of worrying thoughts which begins to turn in the head at such times went round and round and round, never ceasing. At last she heard one o'clock strike, and against all common sense began to feel anxious about her husband's safety. Supposing he had turned dizzy and fallen over the cliff—he had been subject to attacks of dizziness recently. Supposing he had gone by the shore and the tide had overtaken him—supposing——

Then the latch-key sounded cautiously in the lock, and she let herself relax upon the pillow with a feeling of intense relief.

After a while he came very quietly into the room, carrying a candle, and glancing at the bed where Ann lay with her eyes closed. But as he went to the window she opened her eyes and looked at him. He moved with the ease of thoroughly trained muscles and perfect physical proportion, but he seemed to her to be worn fine, as if he could not stand much more without breaking down. If he were to break down——

Then he turned, and she shut her eyes again, while he crept into bed. In a moment or two she put her hand across and murmured——

“Good-night, Steve.”

“Good-night, old girl.”

In a few minutes they lay asleep, hand in hand, tired out with the little things of life. But the faint glow from the night-light on their faces showed they were gaining that great thing which is the purpose of earthly life.

Ann came down next morning, alert and rested, to find a business envelope in the little box, with a type-written address and a London postmark. She laid it aside until the stress of breakfasting and dressing Barbara was over, because she felt sure it was only a bill or a circular; but about half-past nine she paused with a duster in her hand, and carelessly tore it open.

Then she gave a little cry of surprise, for the blank

sheet of note-paper inside contained bank-notes. She counted—ten five-pound notes—fifty pounds. Who in the world could have sent her fifty pounds?

Stephen's barrister friend, who had given them the cheque for their honeymoon? No—he was out of health and away on a long sea voyage. Her father? He would, of course, have written. Stephen's relatives? They were even less likely to bestow anonymous bank-notes.

Then, as she looked at the London postmark, the connection between her conscious and sub-conscious mind was suddenly made; nobody in the world yet knows how that is done, and it seems now a sort of accident *always*; yet it is done. In this way, Ann knew quite definitely, without any previous conscious thought of such a thing, that Barrington had pretended to find the sovereign in the grass, and had noticed that she had been crying over the loss of it, and had sent her this money.

A great stress of anger rushed through her, shaking her so that she had to cling to the mantelpiece for support.

It was an insult. He meant it to be an insult, of that worst kind which cannot be avenged or even noticed, because she had thrown him over. If she wrote to him, he would only deny having sent the money and chuckle to think of her humiliation.

But after a while she was forced to let her common sense speak. It was impossible that Barrington should have acted with such a motive. He had simply sent the money because he was off on a jolly holiday and felt sorry for her. She could hear clearly enough now, though she had never heard it—his generous,



kindly, concerned "Poor little woman!" and again that hot anger flooded her from head to foot.

That he should dare to pity Stephen's wife and send her fifty pounds, as one may, in a generous mood on the way to a dinner party, bestow a shilling on a hungry beggar!

She wanted to run to Stephen—to put her arms about him and hide his poverty from all the world. They should not pity him! They should not pity his wife!

It was as if she had witnessed open shame being put upon him—while she stood by, and could not help him.

Then, again, she began to see reason. He did not know of this, and never would know. Barrington, after all, had meant it in simple kindness, and there was a certain delicacy in his not having sent any sum which would seem to him considerable. The money was in five-pound notes, so that she might spend it readily and think no more about it. She realized all this now she was cool enough to reflect, but her fingers still shook and made a rustling sound with the notes as she pushed them into an envelope and addressed them in a round copy-book handwriting to Captain Barrington's London club. As she stamped the envelope and laid it in the writing-table drawer, ready to post, she breathed evenly once more. The incident was, after all, less tremendous than she had thought, and it was over: she would not let it trouble her any more. What did it matter who pitied her, when she knew that she was the most fortunate woman in the world?

So she went about the house singing rather de-

fiantly, laughing with little Barbara, and rubbing the furniture until it shone almost like what it pretended to be. At about half-past ten she called through into the little kitchen—

“Has the butcher called?”

“Not yet,” said the maid, who disdained the ma’am of servitude.

Then the bell rang.

“Oh, he is here at the front door,” said Ann. “I’ll go.”

She opened the door and stood facing the sun in her pink print apron, her hair blowing in the light breeze, while from the other little houses other women looked out, waiting for the butcher. Ann, there is no doubt, was now a part of it all indeed. The days in which she had regarded the terrace as a mere starting-place seemed now to belong to another phase of existence.

“Oh, good-morning, Mr. Thomson. You have come yourself to-day. A pound of second steak, and half-a-pound of suet, please.”

He glanced up and down the terrace, noticed the craning heads, and said in a subdued, husky voice, decent man that he was, “Might I walk in a minute?”

“Of course,” said Ann, glancing anxiously at his pleasant, red face. “Please come in here.”

She closed the door and waited for what she knew was coming—had, indeed, been long delayed, because of the easy, good-nature observable in the butcher’s now disturbed countenance.

“Mrs. Finlay,” he said, still in the conspirator-like wheeze, “I’m sorry to come to you like this, but I’m



short of money myself. I have a payment to make and I must have it. If you can't—and I know how ladies is often situated—I must go to Mr. Finlay. But I must have it at once."

Ann looked down, twisting her fingers; she had so often read of women being obliged to beg the tradespeople to wait, and it had seemed a small thing, sometimes a little pathetic, sometimes a little amusing, but she had no idea that the reality was degrading and sordid beyond all description. When Mr. Thomson said, almost apologetically, on the top of her white-faced silence, "After all, 'm, you've *had* the meat," she could only agree with him and feel ashamed. Then she remembered that the quarterly instalment of her small income was due on the following Tuesday and said eagerly—

"I will promise to let you have the money next week. There is no need for you to trouble Mr. Finlay. I promise it, on my word of honour."

Mr. Thomson smiled with the immovable obstinacy of good-nature driven into a corner.

"I'm sure you mean it, 'm. All the ladies does. But if you'd been a butcher as long as I have——"

"Then you don't believe me?" said Ann, flushing crimson.

Mr. Thomson shook his head.

"I don't doubt you mean it," he repeated, "but I've got to see the colour of my money this day from you or Mr. Finlay. I have a payment to make. I've sent the bill over and over again. I must have my money. It isn't honest, take it how you will, to eat a man's meat and then not pay his money."

"But I am going to pay—I shall have the money

next week." Ann could scarcely keep the tears out of her eyes.

"Next week!" said Mr. Thomson, beginning to be angry, after the fashion of the easy, good-natured man who is forced into a distasteful effort. "It's always next week. My belief when Judgment comes some of you ladies 'll up and shout 'Next week!' I want my money now, and I'm going to have it."

With that he pocketed his bill and strode towards the door.

Ann ran after him, putting her hand on his blue-clad arm.

"You're not going to Mr. Finlay? You never would?"

"Yes, I am. Mr. Finlay's eaten my meat, hasn't he? Well, he's an upright gentleman, so far as I know, and he'll pay me. Ten to one he doesn't know about the thing being owing at all."

"He doesn't—he doesn't indeed," said Ann. "Oh, wait!"

She stood there in the middle of the little room, thinking of Stephen's face as she had seen it on the previous night when he came in from his walk. He had looked so tired and worn, as if any extra smallest strain might be just the little more than he could bear. And he had always thought that the financial affairs of the household were quite in order, whatever else might trouble him. Ann felt she could not let this man go up to the brick-yard with a demand for money. She must somehow prevent it.

But how?

Her glance did not suddenly fall on Barrington's letter, thus reminding her of a way of escape, because



that letter had been so present to her mind's eye all the time that she was studiously looking away from the writing-table. But her whole soul denied that there was any temptation. No power on earth could make her use Barrington's money to pay Stephen's debts.

But—the money was there.

“Good-morning,” said Mr. Thomson, from the door.

“Wait!” said Ann. “Wait one moment.”

An idea had occurred to her. Surely she might borrow two of the five-pound notes for a few days—there would be no harm in that. In any case, Barrington had gone abroad and would not receive the letter direct. She could equally well return the money next Tuesday. No! the whole idea was so odious that she would not even think of it.

At this point Mr. Thomson made a justifiable noise between a grunt and a snort, and walked out of the house. As he went, the maid called out, “You'll remember the steak!” Then, indeed, he did reach the end of his tether.

“Steak!” he cried. “Go and be a blooming vegetarian! You and your missus and all the lot of you!”

With this curse on his lips he strode down the terrace, and it was only on the high road that Ann, panting, hatless, caught him up with two five-pound notes in her hand.

“You've got 'em!” he gasped. “Where from? You had 'em all the time! Oh! what ways! What meanness! To keep 'em back until you couldn't any longer, when you'd had the meat!” Then the butcher-with-his-bill-paid once more triumphed over

the mortal man, and he scribbled the receipt with a mechanical but still rather flabbergasted, "Much obliged, 'm. Always pleased to serve you. And a pound of steak, I think you said?"

Ann went back to the house, where she sat down for a while, feeling greatly upset; but as the day wore on she began to think that she had made a mountain out of a molehill. After all, it was only a loan to be repaid in a week's time, and nobody any the worse.

When the quarterly instalment of her little income came, however, she found other uses for it so pressing that the loan had to stand aside for the moment. She determined to make up the fifty gradually, as she could, from the housekeeping allowance. Barrington was still abroad. She gradually began to see that it would be all right if the full amount reached his club by the time he returned to England.

Meanwhile, another season at Wodenscar was over. The Comical Midshipmites held benefit performances and farewells until the first autumn storm came, driving such visitors as still remained like leaves before it. The terrace became quiet again, with a few wind-blown chrysanthemums flowering bravely in the gardens, and decorous bow-windows closed, instead of flung up wide to show people sitting in sunburnt groups, waiting for a meal or just replete. The little houses became homes again; Mrs. Walker, who had been prevailed upon to 'let' while she paid visits, first wept over the crumpled daffodils and roses, then dried her tears and ordered geraniums instead, vowing never to let again. Old Mr. Clarke hobbled back from the relatives who bore with him during three months of the summer, glad to be his own man again. The



youngish married couple who went away, as they always said, because they hated the place in the season, returned gaily enough with a nice cheque in their pockets. The first fall of snow came—and it was old Wodenscar that lay, clustered round its old grey church, on the edge of the North Sea.

But perhaps this very return to stability and quiet made Ann more prone to dwell upon the things which belonged to her inner self. She sat through the long evenings sewing, while her husband often worked at his books, and her little girl slept upstairs, and there was no immediate care or pleasure to engross her thoughts, so the affair of Barrington's fifty pounds came constantly into her mind—it began, as the saying is, to get on her nerves.

She would glance across at Stephen as he sat there with his head bent over his papers and picture how he would look if he could know that she had taken Barrington's money to pay for the food of his household. She learned, year by year, to recognize more fully his rigid, narrow sense of honour, which had been exaggerated by the circumstances of his trial and imprisonment, just as his pride had only escaped becoming morbid through the natural virility of his temperament.

If he knew he would perhaps never forgive her—at the very least, he would never think the same of her again—and his pride would be so terribly wounded that she dared not think of it.

But she always hoped from week to week to make up the fifty pounds, and at one time actually reached the amount of forty-seven pounds five shillings—then Stephen fell ill from over-work and needed beef-tea

and chicken and other luxuries, and could not be troubled about money. So the thing went on again until Christmas was over, and the first smell of violets came from the hedgerows round Wodenscar, and spring rushed in, on the wings of a windy, sunshiny April.

Then, one evening, Stephen came home from business and said that Barrington was back again; they had spoken together in the lane outside the brickyard.

"Is he staying this time?" said Ann.

"Yes. Asked if he might come and call to-night."

"Well?"

"I said he could if he liked," answered Stephen.

"But it seems to me a queer thing that he should like. I can't understand it!"

"Um—flattering!" said Ann, with an attempt at lightness.

"It is," laughed Stephen. "I've got you. He wants to come and look on. You don't want me to be able to understand it, do you?"

"Perhaps he'll not come," said Ann hopefully.

But about half-past eight they heard the car at the end of the terrace, and Barrington came up to the house. It was the maid's night out, so Stephen went to the door and the two men came together into the room.

"Ann, here is Captain Barrington," said Stephen.

He stood a little behind, in the shadow, while the full light of the gas shone on Ann's face as she rose, gathering her white work in her arms. It, and her face, made startling splashes of whiteness against her black dress and dark hair, and Stephen's glance was idly arrested by the contrast. Then, while he thus



idly watched, a deep flood of crimson dyed her face and neck, deepening and deepening until the tears of embarrassment stood in her eyes. And she never said a word, nor did Barrington. He, too, had his eyes fixed on her face, and he flushed, too, as if he were moved and surprised. But it had all taken place very quickly, and before the silence had time to grow really marked, Ann held out her hand with a word of ordinary greeting.

Both men had a sort of hidden question in their eyes when they looked at Ann, and there was a sense of tension in the air, of the significance of a moment which yet seemed to hold none of the elements of romance. As a matter of fact, they spoke about drainage, and the difficulties Barrington had encountered in installing a new system which was now practically completed.

Ann said very little at first, but after a while she introduced the subject of Mentone, and sent her husband upstairs to fetch some photographs. As soon as he had left the room she rose from her chair and came close to Barrington. He rose, too, and faced her with the question in his eyes no longer hidden: 'Did she care for him after all?'

"You sent those notes," she said quickly, in a low tone, "I'm going to pay. I had to tell you for fear you—you thought I took it like that—and would take more. I—I should die of shame if you sent any more. It was dreadful enough you knowing—thinking——"

"My dear lady—I don't know what you are talking about," said Barrington, taken aback.

"Don't let us play at that," said Ann. "Please,

don't. It makes it worse. You meant to be kind, I dare say. And I should have returned the money at once without thinking more of the matter; only there was something sudden——” She paused, and looked straight at him. “I may as well tell you the truth. It was the butcher. I took your money to pay for Stephen's food. What do you suppose he would think of me if he ever found out that?”

“He never could. Besides, there is nothing to find out,” said Barrington.

“I'll tell you,” said Ann, holding her work still in her arms and peering, white-faced, across it, her chin thrust forward, “he'd give up loving me. That's all. He'd give up loving me.”

“That——” Barrington paused and looked at her. “I am not quite sure that I should regard that as a misfortune,” he said at last.

“What!” She started back from him. “You mean you'd be revenged?”

“No.” He sighed and looked down at her with whimsical kindness. “Upon my soul, I don't know what I do mean. I thought I'd done with you—and now——”

“The photographs are not there,” said Stephen, at the door.

“Oh! Perhaps they are in the writing-table drawer,” said Ann, rummaging.

“I am afraid I must not stay to see them to-night, Mrs. Finlay. My car is waiting,” said Barrington. “Another time, I hope you will be kind enough——”

They shook hands, the voices of the two men sounded outside in the little garden; then Stephen closed the front door and came back into the room.



"Cold night," said Ann nervously. "Do put some more coal on."

"Ann," he said, "what were you and Barrington talking about?"

"Talking about?" repeated Ann. "Why ordinary things, of course. I don't know."

"Then why were you so agitated? And why are you turning so red now?"

Ann started up.

"Any one would turn red if they were taken up like that?" she said, pretending to be very angry to hide her fear. "Do you think by any chance I was making love to Captain Barrington? If so—and you can't trust me alone for five minutes with a man because I was once engaged to him—— Well! our married life has not amounted to much, Stephen."

"Forgive me! I'm a jealous fool," said Stephen, going up to her and putting his hand on her shoulder; but she shook him off lest he should feel how she was trembling.

"It's all very well—forgive! But how are you going to behave next time I speak to Captain Barrington?" she retorted. Then she began to cry, hiding her face in her white work. "Not that I want to speak to him again—ever! And yet I do like him! There is something kind about him you can't help liking."

"You're right there," said Stephen, staring moodily into the fire. "And the best thing that could happen to you, Ann, would be for me to walk over the cliffs by accident some night, so that you would be free to marry Barrington."

"Stephen!" She looked up at him, white-lipped,

the tears driven back from her eyes. "Oh, Stephen, how can you be so cruel!"

He put a hand to his throbbing head and stared back at her.

"I didn't mean it," he said. "I can't imagine what made me say such a thing. I never thought of it before."

"The thought must have been there, underneath," said Ann in a low voice. "It's when you're upset that the real truth comes out—things you never knew you were thinking at all; they pop out suddenly, spoiling lives."

He gave a sort of groan and went down upon his knees by her side, hiding his face in her lap.

"It's because I love you so, Ann," he said. "And I've seen how you miss all the comforts I ought to be able to give you. Often, this winter, when you didn't know it, I've watched you sewing, and seen how worn you looked and felt you couldn't be happy. Good Lord! no man can understand what it's like, but one who's been through it!"

"My poor boy!" murmured Ann, holding his head close to her breast. "But you are wrong—quite wrong. I've never had a really unhappy hour since I was married to you."

"Is that true?" he said, lifting his head, looking into her face.

"Yes, Stephen."

"If I had only known——"

"I—well, I don't think I knew myself," said Ann, laughing a little tearfully. "Now, it's time we went to bed or you'll have a headache in the morning."

So they put out the lights and went softly up the



stairs of the little darkened house together. Just as they were falling asleep, Stephen roused himself and said, quite suddenly—

“One blessing—we’ve kept out of debt. I don’t believe I could stand that—could you?”

There was a pause before Ann said, “N-no.”

“But for your good management we might easily have got into debt—you’re a wonderful little wife, Ann.”

But she did not respond at all this time, and he thought she was already asleep.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CAPTAIN

A TEA-PARTY was taking place at the house of Dr. Grey, and one of the ladies present, leaning forward over her neatly-balanced tea-cup, said in a high tone of conscious refinement—

“I gather that Captain Barrington is indisposed?”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Grey, reluctant to talk of her husband’s patients, “my husband has been called in, I believe.”

“What is it?” said Ann.

“Drainage, I understand,” said the lady with the ready vocabulary. “One never, somehow, expects Captain Barrington to be anything but well. Quite the type of the virile Englishman.”

“Just the sort to get typhoid by hanging over an open cesspool,” said a direct, fat lady in a corner. “A delicate man would have more sense.”

“But I thought it was all finished,” said Ann.

“So it was. They came across this place in doing something to an outside wall,” said Mrs. Grey, “and the foreman called Captain Barrington to look at it. He—the foreman—told the doctor that various alterations had been made from time to time during the past thirty years, and you never knew what you would come across then. The only wonder is that everybody in the house did not get typhoid long ago.”

“They hardly ever do in those old houses until



people begin to stir things up," said the fat lady. "That's the way all through—too much stirring up in these days. Nobody content to let well alone."

"But this was letting bad alone," laughed Mrs. Grey. "Do you want that?"

"Don't know. Sometimes you move the bad and make way for a worse."

"Anyway," said Ann, "I am afraid you mean, Mrs. Grey, that Captain Barrington is really ill."

"Oh, not seriously. A very slight attack, if it does turn out to be really typhoid at all," said Mrs. Grey. "My husband is not in the least uneasy."

"And the captain is not one of your weaklings," said the fat lady. "He's been bred on plenty of good food and drink and fresh air. He'll be all right."

"I'm sure I hope so," said Ann earnestly, rising to go. "I hope so, indeed."

They all glanced at her, wondering a little, and remembering that—perhaps—she might have been the sick man's wife. But she was too engrossed in her own thoughts to notice this, and hurried home with a leaden feeling of dull apprehension in her mind which she was unable to shake off.

At supper she spoke of the matter to her husband, and he said he had chanced to see Grey, who feared it was typhoid, but did not anticipate a serious case. Barrington was a strong man in excellent condition, and had the best nurses that could be obtained—good nursing meant everything in cases of typhoid; there was no cause whatever for alarm.

And as time went on Grey's opinion appeared to be justified. People going up and down the terrace paused to ask each other for the latest news, and it

was always favourable. Until one afternoon, Ann, mending a glove by the open bedroom window, suddenly heard Mrs. Walker's voice below—

“Not quite so well to-day, I'm told. But of course there must be these ups and downs. You couldn't expect him to get well right ahead.”

Ann dropped the glove and leaned from the window.

“Mrs. Walker!” she called.

Mrs. Walker looked up and bowed with some stateliness, for there had been a cloud over her intercourse with the Finlay family during the past three or four months. She had called once, in gloves, and sent a Christmas card to Barbara, but looked the other way in meeting Ann when it was possible, and bowed coldly when recognition became inevitable.

“Good-afternoon!” she called back, and walked on to her own house.

But Ann ran after her and said anxiously—

“May I come in with you? What is this you have heard about Captain Barrington? Is he really worse?”

“Oh, not much, that I know of. Pray sit down,” said Mrs. Walker, seating herself very erect and adjusting her waist. “That is, if you care to do so.”

“Mrs. Walker,” said Ann impulsively, “what have I done to offend you? I never asked you before because I thought it was better not. I believed it was some trifle that would blow over. Neighbours do get in and out like that, I'm told. But I looked on you as a friend, and it has troubled me very much.”

“You!” said Mrs. Walker. “You've plenty of people without me. You don't want me now. But



you can't mean to tell me you've been going on all this time not knowing what I was vexed about?"

"I haven't an idea," said Ann.

"Well, then, it's just this. When you came here you brought your Barbara, and expected me to turn my Gertie out of the room as if she was a dog, just because she had once scratched the child's arm in pure playfulness—the poor darling. And when I went to your house and my Gertie happened to follow me, you'd show her out as if she had the plague. You can't expect me to put up with that. It isn't likely."

"Oh, Mrs. Walker," exclaimed Ann, "I'm awfully sorry! But—but, after all, Gertie is only a cat, and she scratched Barbara three times."

"Only a cat!" said Mrs. Walker. "Let me tell you my Gertie's as much to me as your Barbara is to you! You women with children, you think you've done something so almighty wonderful, when you've only——" She broke off, breathless, and her glance was caught by the bright sardine-box on the tea-table. "You've only done in ones what any—sardine—can do in thousands!"

"I know," said Ann humbly, forbearing the vestige of a smile. Indeed, she had not much inclination to smile, because she detected something beyond all this which was more pathetic than amusing, though her neighbour would, indignantly and quite sincerely, have denied the existence of any such feeling.

"Of course," continued Mrs. Walker, unconsciously parodying, "there are people to whom a cat's only a cat—you can't be anything but sorry for them." She paused. "And you've plenty of other friends, of course."

"I shall never have plenty when you are not amongst them," said Ann, with genuine feeling. "I can never forget—why, you're part of my life."

"You took your time before you asked for an explanation," said Mrs. Walker, wiping away a tear. "I thought you'd got too grand for me. I'm sure I've been miserable enough, though wild horses shouldn't have made me show it."

"I've been greatly worried," said Ann, "or else I think I should have come to you before and made you tell me what was the matter."

"I'm sorry you've had trouble," said Mrs. Walker. "But we all get it now and then. The only thing is to face it and go through with it when it comes, and not think ourselves badly done to because we're like everybody else. The rub comes when we first find we're not picked out, as we all think we are at first, to have nothing but fun and feasting. We get afraid of what's before us. But when we once get over that and begin to see everything's a part of life—well, we're all right. We're not frightened any longer."

Mrs. Walker had risen and stood, a taut figure, against a vase of paper geraniums which glowed on a rather dusty sideboard.

"It's just this," she said: "instead of sitting down and thinking, 'Can I bear it?' you've just got to call out to things over your shoulder, 'Come on! I'm ready when you are!' and go about doing what you want to do. Then the things often don't come after all. However"—Mrs. Walker suddenly dropped to the concrete from this rather incoherent statement of her principles—"will you have a cup of tea?"

"Thank you, I must not stay," said Ann. "But I



heard you talking of Captain Barrington; is he really worse?"

"I'm afraid so," said Mrs. Walker. "No danger at all; but he is not going on so well. I couldn't help thinking——"

"Yes?" said Ann.

"Well, of the morning he came down here after you'd gone, Mrs. Finlay. I know you're happily married, and I respect your husband, as any one must do who knows him, but there was a something about the captain—I could have understood any girl running away from anybody with the captain——" Mrs. Walker paused, and added in a low tone, "I left him by himself in your sitting-room, and once when I passed the door I heard him sobbing—as if it would tear him to pieces. So I went upstairs and stopped there. And I never came down again until I heard him leave."

"I deserve to be unhappy," said Ann.

"Well, if we all got our deserts there'd be precious little to clear away, as my old aunt used to say," responded Mrs. Walker briskly, filling the teapot. "Here, you must have a cup. Tea stands by you when all else goes. One lump—now, that's as you like it."

So Ann took the tea, realizing how much Mrs. Walker's estrangement had increased the dullness of the past months, though she had been too self-engrossed to notice it much at the time.

When she returned home Stephen had already come back from business. A few minutes later, while they still spoke of Barrington's illness, there was a ring at the bell and Dr. Grey's voice could be heard asking for

the master of the house. Stephen went out quickly into the passage, where the two men spoke together for a few moments in low tones; then the doctor hurried away again and Stephen came back into the room.

"What did Dr. Grey want?" said Ann casually, thinking it was some parochial matter. "The great water question again?"

"No!" He closed the door behind him, and his grave tone caused Ann to look up quickly from her work. "The fact is, Grey came with a message. Barrington is worse."

"Well?"

"Ann, he wants to see me."

"You!"

"Yes. I'm as much in the dark as you are," said Stephen. "I can't understand what he can want with me. Can you?"

Ann shook her head. She was absolutely certain that Barrington would never mention the fifty pounds. It was not that.

"I have no idea why he should send for you," she said, perplexed and disturbed. "Poor Arthur! It is impossible to imagine him dangerously ill—he can't be dying, Stephen."

"I'm afraid he is, Ann. There is a chance, but not much."

"Shall you go?"

Stephen walked to the window, which was, on this windy April evening, a little dim with the spray from the waves which leapt and boomed beyond the end of the terrace. Every twig and plant was moving, and the clouds scudded like little ships across the sky—this salt, grey world seemed so wonderfully alive.



“I’ll go,” he said, turning back from the window. “Poor chap—in the very middle of life. Of course I must go.”

Ann sat quite still and said nothing.

“You don’t want me to go?” he said.

“You think you must?” she said at last.

“Must! I don’t know about ‘must.’ But when a man’s dying, and sends for you—why, I should have thought you would have seen that more plainly than I do, Ann.”

“I do see it,” said Ann. “Of course you must go.” She paused. “Of course you must go,” she repeated.

He looked at her, and as he looked his fine, clear features suddenly hardened, while all expression went out of them.

“Why don’t you want me to go?” he said slowly. “Is it that you are afraid of something he might tell me?”

“No,” she said, “I’m not afraid of that. But I’m afraid of telling you what I must before I let you go to him. I can’t think what he wants you for, but it may be to offer us some kindness. He—he once saw me crying on the road because I had lost a sovereign, and—and afterwards he sent me fifty pounds.”

“And you kept it?” The coldness of his voice struck to Ann’s heart.

“The bank-notes came anonymously—in a blank paper and a typed envelope—I could never be sure,” she faltered, looking down.

“But you knew?”

There was quite a long pause, in which they could hear the sea booming; then she looked straight at him and said in a low, steady tone—

"Yes, I knew. I won't shuffle about it, Stephen. I knew, and I took ten pounds to pay the butcher's bill, meaning to put it back. But there was always something. I never could."

"And how much have you left now?"

"About twenty-three pounds."

"So that's how you've kept me free from debt," he said.

Then he put on his coat and went away down the terrace without another word.

Ann listened to that peculiar footfall as she had so often done before, and she had a terrible fear lest it should never come back again. The maid came in to say that Barbara was in bed, but she never answered, nor went up to bid the child 'Good-night.' She only sat on, feeling that her happiness had come to an end. All her life she had longed so to be happy—and now she would never be happy any more. But she did not weep at all—she only sat staring before her with idle hands.

Stephen walked quickly along the road to the Red Grange, with his whole being in a turmoil of anger and jealousy and wounded pride. He had no definite thought beyond a determination to have this thing out with Barrington, whether the man was dying or not. That any one should have dared! The long, twilit road grew indistinct before him, in a sudden access of impotent rage.

When he reached the house he was at once shown up into the invalid's room, and the nurse went away, leaving the two men together.

But when Stephen looked towards the bed he saw a

stranger there with half-grown beard and gaunt eyes; he found it impossible for the moment to realize that this was Barrington. Then he heard the familiar voice say rather hoarsely—

“This is good of you, Finlay. I wouldn’t have sent, but I had something rather important to say to you, and it seems possible that I shall never be able to go out again.” He held out a hand—the white hand of the mortally sick man—and of all the bitter things Stephen had meant to say there only came forth a blurted, “Nonsense, Barrington; you’re not done yet!”

“Oh, no,” said Barrington, with an attempt at lightness. “But I had a fight before they would let me send for you. It’s not the illness I mind so much as this damned interference with a man’s liberty.”

He was plainly nervous, and trying to cover it. Stephen was touched, as any man must have been, but that did not prevent his saying what he intended to say when he stormed along the road in the twilight, though he said it differently.

“Barrington,” he began, “there’s something I must have out with you before we can talk. Did you send my wife fifty pounds anonymously?”

Barrington closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again and smiled at Stephen.

“That’s rather unexpected,” he said. “Who told you such a ridiculous tale?”

“Ann did.”

There was another pause, then Barrington began again—

“But, my dear chap, I never——”

“Look here, Barrington, it’s no good. I know you

sent the money. Ann knows. It was an insult—an unpardonable insult. That you should send my wife money! And you can't deny it."

"I can and I do."

"Then you lie."

Barrington looked searchingly at Stephen, and yet with a strange detachment. "Finlay, if I'd been a poor man and had married Ann, and you'd been a richish chap, with more than you wanted, and—and you came across her in the lane, crying over a blessed sovereign, what should you have done?"

Stephen stood with his hands in his pockets staring at the carpet.

"Well?" said Barrington.

"I don't know," said Stephen at last. "I don't know."

"And that brings us," said Barrington, speaking now with more effort, "to my purpose in asking you to come here to-night. I want—I want to leave Ann a keepsake. Will you let her take it?"

"Not money?" said Stephen quickly.

"No."

"Barrington, I'm afraid I can't," said Stephen, after a pause. "After all that's been and gone——"

The tears of weakness came into Barrington's eyes, but he said bravely enough—

"So be it."

"Hang it all," said Stephen, "you're not going to die!"

"I hope not."

"But—but if you should—well, leave Ann your keepsake! I——" He put out his hand. "You've



everything in your favour, Barrington. You'll soon pull round hard enough. We shall see you coming up the terrace before long."

"Oh, very likely. Good-bye."

So Stephen found himself outside the corridor with a nurse who looked sternly at him and said, "You have been a very long time. I hope Captain Barrington is no worse?"

Then Dr. Grey appeared with a rather anxious face, and Stephen followed a footman through the great panelled hall, which seemed inexpressibly gloomy in the spring evening.

As he walked back towards home he suddenly felt that it was impossible to face Ann until he had thought things out a little. The near presence of death had altered the relative importance of things in his mind, as it so often does, and he was no longer angry with his wife; but he had lost his sense of complete confidence in her. She ought to have told him. What else was she keeping from him?

It was ten o'clock when Ann at last heard his footsteps in the terrace, but though she had listened for him until her head buzzed with the strain of catching every little sound, she did not go out to the door to meet him. He found her seated in her old place under the gas, sewing, and she only looked up without speaking when he entered the room.

"You needn't look at me like that," he said irritably. "I'm not going to hit you."

For her worn look and the tired outline of her figure made him feel unaccountably in the wrong, when he knew he was in the right.

"How did you find Barrington?" she said.

"Oh, very ill, I am afraid," and he sat down by the writing-table. "Won't you have some supper?"

"No, thank you."

There was silence after that until Ann suddenly started up.

"Stephen," she said, "I've done a wrong thing and a stupid thing, but not one to ruin our lives, unless we let it."

"Of course we are not going to let it," he said, rising from the table. "The fault is mine, really. If I had been able to give you sufficient money this could never have happened. Don't let us ever refer to the matter again."

"Very well." Then, as he went towards the door, "Going out again, Stephen? What for?"

"I am posting a cheque for fifty pounds to Barrington."

"But, Stephen, how shall you spare it? You said your account was overdrawn already."

He made no reply and went out.

When he came back again Ann was just going up to bed, and he kissed her as they said 'Good-night.'

"Don't worry, dear. Everything is all right," he whispered.

"Just as it was before?"

"Exactly the same."

. But they both knew differently in their hearts, because when things are once changed, they never become exactly the same any more. However, the course of the Finlays' life remained, to all outward appearance, just as it had ever been, and they laughed



and talked and played with Barbara at breakfast the next morning no less pleasantly than before.

In the afternoon, being Saturday, they were all three together on the sands building a castle which they decorated with stones and seaweed.

Stephen had just fastened a flaunting streamer of brown weed upon his walking-stick, causing Barbara's childish laughter to ring out above the hush of a quiet sea, when, immediately following the laughter, came the heavy "Dong!" of the passing bell. It frightened some sea-gulls floating close inshore, and they flew screaming up into the grey sky.

Stephen and Ann looked at each other.

"Barrington?"

"Yes; it must be."

They rose, took Barbara, protesting, from the sand-castle, and walked quietly home together. People were standing outside on the road, still looking towards the church from which the solemn news had come.

"Such a fine gentleman as the captain was—and everything the heart could wish—and he's had to leave it all."

"Somehow you can't think of him gone—and him so strong and jolly."

Thus they talked in the terrace, as they did all over Wodenscar; but in one of the little houses behind the church an old woman said something more, nodding and chuckling over the fire.

"Drains!" she said. "Drains and typhoid they say it is, do they? I know different. Drains never killed old Courtenay."

"But, grandmother," patiently explained a niece, who was a school-teacher and enlightened, "you have heard all the circumstances twice over. Dr. Grey feels sure that the disease is traceable——"

"Shoo!" said the old woman, "what care I for all your Dr. Greys?" She bent forward, holding up a gnarled forefinger. "See you here! I was alive and noticing when old Courtenay was young—you weren't—and I always knowed he'd best 'em at finish. He said nobody as wasn't of his blood should live at t' Red Grange, and what he said come true—always."

"But, grandmother, what connection could the late Mr. Courtenay possibly have with the present circumstances?" said the niece. "Such superstition is really childish."

"I know nought about how he connected himself with the drains, but he done it somehow," persisted the old woman. Then she began to chuckle reminiscently. "Ay, ay, he was a rare devil in his day, he was. A rare devil. Nowt like him now!"

"Good thing too," said the niece, "from all accounts."

"I'm none so sure of that!" flared the grandparent. "It's a dull old world you've gotten now—that it is. Not like when I were a girl."

For a moment she stared into the fire, and then muttered feebly—

"Where's my tea? Always so much talk and no do. Where's my tea? Ay, ay, he was like that, old Courtenay was—I'm glad he's bested 'em."

And so, while the special trains came into Woden-scar, and bells tolled, and the air of the old church became heavy with the scent of funeral wreaths, this



THE CAPTAIN

291

tale crept round the narrow streets behind the church.

But it did not reach the clergyman or the congregation who knelt, decorously mourning, sad because a man was gone, but vaguely sure that they would live for ever—which feeling alone, excluding an intense faith in God, makes people able to attend funerals.

Ann knelt beside her husband, with her heart very full of kind memories, and she prayed most humbly and sincerely that she might be forgiven for any harm she had done to Arthur Barrington, and that God would take care of him and make him happy.

She was so engrossed in her own thoughts that she remained unaware of the curious glances directed towards her by those who had already heard that she inherited the Red Grange. For this was the keepsake to which Barrington alluded in his last interview with Stephen.

It was rather characteristic of a certain sentimental element in the dead man's nature that he should leave Ann his home, in which he had once hoped to live with her as his wife, but which could not, at present, be of any practical use to her. Anyway, the fact remains that he liked to think of her possessing it, and that he died happier for the thought.

The Finlays walked home from the funeral by the fields in order to escape the groups of people who stood about saying that the captain made the place jollier while he was there, which is, after all, no bad epitaph. And when Stephen reached the bend of the road leading to the sea, he put his hand through his wife's arm and said—

“After all, it's a little thing I've been making you

and myself miserable about. I see that now. Shall we forget it?"

"We can't do that. Nobody can; they only pretend. But we can do something better," said Ann.

"Yes," said Stephen.

They both knew, as they walked silently home together, what the better thing was; and as they turned into the terrace Stephen said—

"You just want courage to remember things in the right way."

"That's it," said Ann. "Courage of soul. And then—and then——" She paused, thinking. "Experience becomes no longer an awful rubbish-heap you feel is always there—and shiver and blink at—it's the treasure you're piling up."

"A rich experience. I am beginning now to see what that means," said Stephen. Then he suddenly changed the subject. "Look at that chimney smoking!"

"Yes. Why will people burn those awful things instead of sending for the chimney-sweep?" responded Ann at once.

For few husbands and wives can talk together about the deeper things of life for more than ten sentences without feeling ashamed; and when a man wishes to discuss his inmost soul at length with his wife of some years' standing, he is not, as a rule, very far from the divorce court.

CHAPTER XIX

MUDDLE

ANN'S sister Margaret had now completed her training at the Trentford hospital, and was staying for a fortnight with the Finlays. She had not become less aware of her superiority in the matter of common sense to other people, and she felt no slightest doubt about her capacity for improving Stephen, Ann, and particularly Barbara.

"Poor little thing," said Ann, holding her sobbing daughter. "You think she is cross, auntie, when she is only miserable."

"I think," said auntie, drawing in her lips, "that I should teach the young lady to display some distinguishing mark. However, give her the chocolate, Ann, for goodness' sake, and then perhaps we can hear ourselves speak."

"Auntie have one too," said Barbara, dimpling through her tears.

"There, then!" said Ann.

"Well, I must own she has a sweet nature," said Margaret. "It is only you that are trying to ruin it. But it's not I who will have to pay doctors' bills, though I may have to nurse her through appendicitis. Proper diet——"

At the end of five minutes Ann said, "Yes, Margaret, I quite agree with you. And now, what would

you do about the Red Grange if you were in my place?"

"Sell it," said Margaret, "of course!"

"We don't like to do that—under the circumstances. You know what Arthur Barrington said to Stephen?"

"Yes; but that makes no difference. If an admirer of mine died and left me a steam-yacht for a keepsake, I shouldn't feel obliged to keep it in the Flodmouth docks until it went rotten. I should sell it and have a good time on the proceeds. I should know he meant me to."

"Stephen won't hear of it," said Ann.

"Stephen!" said Margaret. "Oh, men are so sentimental! I've no patience with them. What does he want you to do?"

"He thinks we might let it as soon as we can get a tenant, and in the meantime we know of a market gardener in Wodenscar who would keep the gardens in order, in return for the fruit and vegetables."

"Um!" said Margaret; "and what's to be the end of it all? Are you expecting to live there some day?"

"Perhaps—if we can get enough money," said Ann, with a laugh.

"You never will," said Margaret; "at any rate, not so long as Stephen stays in this dead-and-live hole trying to make a fortune out of bricks. How you can stand it is more than I can imagine. Do you expect to go on living like this for years and years—until you both get old and frousty and nothing matters?"

"I suppose so," said Ann.

"Awful!" said Margaret. "It would simply finish me off. And yet, when we were at home, it was always you who were ambitious and wanted to go about

and see the world. How marriage seems to change people!"

"Yes," said Ann.

"And you really mean you are perfectly content with this narrow life in this little terrace in a third-rate seaside town?"

"Perfectly," said Ann.

"You're not!" said Margaret. "I don't believe it. I see you when I'm talking about my post in South Africa, and I know you feel it strange that I should be getting wider horizons, mentally and physically, than ever you can; you feel it's narrow here now, whatever you did before I came. Just servants leaving and baby ill sometimes—and you, who always made things happen even when they didn't! I shall speak to Stephen. He is a man with brains. Surely he can get something to do somewhere that would permit of your having a better life than this."

"Dear old Marge," said Ann, putting her hand on her sister's knee; "it's nice to see you care so, old girl, but indeed I am very happy here. Of course, there are times when I feel that if Stephen stirs the sugar round and round in the bottom of his teacup once more I shall die—and no doubt he feels the same about some mannerism of mine; but that's nothing."

"That's marriage," said Margaret.

"No, it's not. It is what makes marriage possible in a world where perfect institutions can't exist," said Ann, laughing.

"Well," said Margaret, with absolute sincerity, "I'm thankful I am single."

"But there is no such happiness as in a really happy marriage."

"Perhaps not," said Margaret; "I must own that you seem contented enough. But you are not really enjoying life—you are getting through it and hoping for something better next year—or next ten years. I hear you, 'When the brick business improves.' 'When Barbara gets older.' It's never *now!* I'm going to live *now.*"

"You are mistaken," said Ann, all the more warmly because she felt a certain truth in these remarks. "I do enjoy my life."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it," said Margaret; "but I suppose you would not weep if Stephen got a good post in some place where you could have an easier time and wider outlook? You are not so wedded to Wodenscar as all that!"

"Of course I should not weep," said Ann; "but it is useless to think of such a thing. We are settled here, and there's an end of it."

All the same, Margaret's words only gave form and substance to what had lain uneasily dormant in her mind all the past winter. She glanced out of the window as her sister spoke and saw a fat gentleman with a handbag go up the terrace—the first 'visitor' of the season—the substantial swallow who harbingered band, and pierrots and tents, and brown-faced, sandy children. Suddenly the monotony of her daily life appeared intolerable to her. She looked forward along the dull years spreading out, and her heart failed her.

She turned from the window and the grey sky and the fat gentleman, to own at last—

"After all, you're right. It is deadly. If only one could get away from Wodenscar!"



“I’m sorry if I have unsettled you,” said Margaret. “But sometimes people need to be unsettled. They get into a sort of hole, and there they stick. You and Stephen are like that, though you do seem to hit it off better than the average. All the same, you ought not to let your husband think you are quite satisfied to go on grubbing for ever in a little den like this with one incompetent servant. You were meant for something better!”

“I’d rather have Stephen than a million of money,” declared Ann.

“Yes, but there’s no need to make him so sure of it,” said Margaret. “I think he ought to try for another post. There’s that barrister friend who gave you the cheque for a wedding present—surely he could help. Anyway, I shall speak to Stephen.”

“Oh, you must not do that!” said Ann hastily. “You don’t know the harm you might cause. Margaret, I must insist on your leaving the matter alone. Promise me.”

Margaret, however, declined to promise, and took an opportunity of speaking to her brother-in-law upon the subject that same evening, while Ann was upstairs with little Barbara.

He said very little in return, and neither he nor Margaret mentioned the conversation to Ann, so she naturally concluded that it had not happened.

The next day Margaret went away to take her place among those brave women who have made a fine and pleasant thing out of a phase of existence which their maiden aunts as a rule found dull and purposeless, and the Finlays were once more alone. The household had been strung up to concert pitch during the

past fortnight, and it was rather a relief to the mistress that she could order in a bit of bread and cheese for lunch, while the maid's soiled apron went unproved.

In the afternoon Mrs. Walker came to call, without Gertie, and Ann welcomed her as a relief from the intense lucidity of Margaret. For intensely lucid people and books are delightful for a time, but after a while they produce the sensation of little, sharp hammers falling with unerring precision on some sensitive spot in the brain. You wait for the hit, and it always comes and you enjoy it—but not after the spot becomes sore.

Thus the rather rambling and clouded remarks upon Wodenscar politics with which Mrs. Walker led up to the real object of her call were a refreshment to Ann, who failed to notice the uneasiness which lay behind them. She listened contentedly while her guest discoursed of the iniquities of the people to whom she had let her house and the stain afterwards discovered on the new carpet—though it was an old tale and a long one.

But at last Mrs. Walker approached the real purpose of her visit, and remarked with rather overdone carelessness—

“You've seen a stout gentleman going in and out next door? A widower?”

“I didn't see that.”

“Oh, well, I always think it's written on them, like widows—sort of married and yet single look, if you understand; but that's neither here nor there. What I really mean to say is that—now don't you bother yourself at all about it, Mrs. Finlay, nor get uneasy—



but both his little boys are down with scarlatina. Brought it with them, evidently, and took ill as soon as they got here."

"Scarlatina! Next door!" cried Ann, starting up. "Oh, if Barbara should catch the infection!"

"Come, come!" soothed Mrs. Walker. "I hesitated to tell you, because I knew you would be in such a way. Barbara can't catch anything through a brick wall, but I do think perhaps it would be best for you to go away for a bit from the terrace. We seem all so one on the top of the other, and Mr. Baxter—that's the widower—seems to have no idea of keeping himself to himself. He came to my house four times last evening to ask my advice, and when it got to a quarter to twelve and him still there, talking on and on about chicken tea and his loneliness, I felt it was time to mention Mr. Walker. So I did. And he said, surprised, 'Mr. Walker! Your husband is always away, then?' And I said, 'Yes, but he leaves me to guard his honour.' Like that I said it!"

Ann laughed, in spite of her harassed preoccupation.

"I don't wonder the widower was surprised, poor man!"

"Oh, I didn't make up the remark myself. I heard it in a theatre at Trentford. But it moved the gentleman in the play, and it moved Mr. Baxter. He went then. You know what it is in the terrace, Mrs. Finlay—a lady can't have a widower asking advice after tea without things being said—unless she's old enough to make things being said a compliment."

"But where are we to go?" said Ann, who had ceased to listen. "We may already have contracted

the fever. Anyway, neither my relatives nor Mr. Finlay's would wish to take us in, even if we could ask them."

"Will you come to me? That's a bit further away, and I should be only too pleased to have you—as—as private guests, I mean."

"No, thank you," said Ann. "You are very kind, but that would be no use."

"You could take lodgings somewhere else," suggested Mrs. Walker.

"Yes; but imagine what we should have to pay if Barbara did fall ill! And they might insist on her being sent away to an isolation hospital. Besides——" She stopped short.

"Of course," agreed Mrs. Walker, just as if Ann had completed the sentence, "a six weeks' stay in lodgings does run into a lot of money at this time of year, with the season just beginning. I think you'll just have to stay where you are and hope for the best."

"No," said Ann; "I'd rather camp out on the sands."

"Camp out!" cried Mrs. Walker. "I have it!"

"What?"

"Why, you can picnic for a time in two or three rooms at the Red Grange. Of course! Nothing better. House not had time to get damp. Drainage in perfect condition. Lovely garden. What more do you want?"

"Do you think it would be possible?" said Ann, with the air of one beginning to see a light in the darkness. "I suppose one could cook on an oil-stove—those immense kitchens would be quite out of the



question—and a bedroom or two— Oh yes, I do believe it would be all right. Mrs. Walker, you're a wonderful woman!"

"If you mean to go," said Mrs. Walker, not denying the fact, "you'd best go at once."

"To-morrow morning," said Ann.

"But will your servant go with you?"

"I think so," said Ann. "She is not a Wodenscar girl, and knows nothing of the silly tales about the Red Grange."

"I suppose," said Mrs. Walker, after a slight pause, "that there is nothing at all in them. You never saw anything?"

"No," said Ann.

"Nor heard anything?"

"N-no. No! I never did. I had a sort of feeling—once or twice—but it was just fancy. A girl, living in that atmosphere, would be certain to fancy she felt something unusual, unless she were quite devoid of imagination. But I am sure now that there was nothing at all in it."

"Well," said Mrs. Walker, "I'll come in to-morrow and help you to get off. I suppose Mr. Finlay won't raise any objections?"

"Oh, I think not. He'll feel as I do about Barbara," said Ann.

When Stephen came home, however, an hour later, it must be owned he, at first, failed to see the matter in the same light as his wife. But he soon realized that Ann would never know a peateful moment until Barbara was out of the terrace, and threw himself into the preparations with an ardour which rendered possible an early move the next morning.

The old carrier, gay and debonair at seventy, consoled her, as he took down the boxes, with the reflection that his nine children had suffered from scarlet fever all at once, and only two had died of it. The bow-windows twinkled in the sun when Ann went down the terrace holding Barbara's hand, and there were pinks in bloom now in the little gardens, mingling their wholesome fragrance with the keen sea breezes. It seemed a pleasant, sunshiny, homely place to be leaving, as Ann turned the corner and walked beside the maid, wheeling Barbara in a push-cart. Once or twice the carrier looked back at them over their piles of boxes and bedding, waving an encouraging hand. And they were heartened, as any one must be, by seeing a poor man who has toiled hard all his days still finding life at seventy a gay affair.

Even on a bad day he would call out, "Fine morning, ladies!" and the ladies, feeling perhaps a little sad at the price of bacon or the failure of a new gown, would instantly feel that it was quite a nice morning, and mere existence in the sparkling sea air a thing for which to be thankful.

As he trundled up the drive of the Red Grange, with Barbara gurgling from her push-cart in the rear at the sight of the trees and flowers, he gave to the whole thing the air of a jolly picnic. Even Phyllis, the maid, who had been inclined to the moroseness common to maids when jerked suddenly out of their daily routine, now unbent and remarked on the fineness of the cabbages which now grew in sacred places where old Courtenay's language, could he have seen them, would have rendered the ordinary cooking process unnecessary.



"I do love cabbage and bacon," said Phyllis, licking her lips.

So it was a happy procession which reached the great front door, where the bolts and bars were already a little difficult to open from a few weeks' disuse in the heavily salt-laden air.

At last the door came open with a jerk and the old carrier's voice from within sounded almost frightened, though he emerged jauntily, as usual.

"Next time you send any one in by the little side-door to open this, you must give them a plan of the house, Mrs. Finlay. I often came to bring things in old Mr. Courtenay's time, but I always went to the back, of course." Then he added, behind his hand, with a glance at the maid, "Does she know?"

"What? Hush!" said Ann.

"No fear! I'll say naught to her. But I give you my word as I tried to open that door, I could feel something pulling against me. Sure as you're there, I could."

"What nonsense, Hobson," said Ann severely. "Surely you don't think that a man who has gone to his rest has nothing better to do than to go about frightening people. It is a dreadful idea."

"Well, Mrs. Finlay," said old Hobson, "you're new to Wodenscar. What I call new, that is. But I've been here all my life, and my father and grandfather before me, and I tell you this: old Mr. Courtenay might expect to be unpleasanter occupied now than in going round a place scaring folks—so he might."

"We will have the packing-case on that side, I think," said Ann, retiring from the discussion of old Courtenay's present state.

And half-an-hour later the carrier went gaily back again to the humming, busy little world behind the church, while Ann remained to set in order this house which might so easily have been her home.

She was too busy during the day to think definitely of Mrs. Barrington or Arthur, but the thought of them was all the time in the back of her mind, ready to emerge when the pressing things of the moment ceased to engross her attention.

But the thoughts, when they did come, were after all not such as to make her unhappy. She walked with Stephen in the garden that lovely June evening, and watched the sun set over the old house, with a sense of tender regret and kindness for those who had shown her nothing but kindness: and she wished from the bottom of her heart that she had given them a better return. But she was happy with her husband and her child. The slight excitement of the change had driven away the sense of restlessness which had troubled her during the past few days, and as she and Stephen took their late supper of cold ham and salad and strawberries fresh from the garden in the semi-twilight before the open window, they were permeated by a sense of rest and joy and contentment.

It chanced to be a very dry, warm season, and the weeks between the Sundays in Trinity slipped away in a blue haze of summer weather, with sounds of haymaking and harvest to mark the progress of the year, and the monotonous undertone of the sea to remind the little party that they were still in Wodenscar.

But at last the nights grew chilly, and the Finlays were obliged to realize that the days of picnicking were over. The fireplaces, even in the smaller rooms



they inhabited, swallowed up a ton of coal in a week and yawned for more. It was altogether out of the question to remain in this great, empty place after the autumn had set in, so one grey day, when a mist hung over the little town, and the sea brooded, hushing, at the edge of it, Ann went back to the terrace in order to superintend the cleaning of the house. She had tried to let it, but failed, owing to the cases of scarlatina next door, and it remained just as it was when they made their hurried departure.

A charwoman, with a tight-lipped mouth and black eyes, was raising clouds of dust as Ann went in, and the little rooms looked indescribably mean and cramped after the empty spaciousness of the Red Grange. The windows were for the moment curtainless, and every defect in the cheap furniture was glaringly evident. As Ann looked round she experienced a sort of overwhelming distaste for the whole thing—the daily life those chairs and tables and cushions stood for. She felt that she simply could not bear to come back to it all.

But she began to dust and polish the ornaments which she had dusted hundreds of times before, and would dust, as it seemed, until they were broken or she died.

Then, suddenly, she flung down a foolish little vase she was dusting, and smashed it into atoms. The impulse which caused her to do such a futile thing passed in a second, and when the charwoman came running in to see what was the meaning of the crash, she felt very much ashamed—she looked at the work-worn face peering round the door, and knew herself for a discontented fool.

"Oh!" cried the charwoman, "that lovely vase with roses on that I've always envied. And now you've spoilt the pair."

"Will you have the other one?" said Ann, taking it from the shelf.

"Thank you, Mrs. Finlay. It will look beautiful in my best room. My word, you have a lot of nice things, you have."

She went back to her sweeping, and of course the moral hit Ann in the eye, but with the irritating effect of all too pointed morals. She remembered once more the conversation she and Margaret had held in that room on such very different lines, and she wished now that she had permitted her sister to urge Stephen to seek some appointment away from Wodenscar. She knew quite well that there was very little chance of his obtaining a post worth having, but at least he could try.

She decided to speak to him herself about it, though anything she could say on the subject would be an admission that she was dissatisfied with her life as it was, and that she had no faith in the ultimate success of the brick-making business; but she felt, as she emerged very tired from the little house in the late afternoon, that she simply had not the courage to face long years of days, every detail of which she could tell over like beads in a rosary—that rosary of household meditations which millions of women all over the world wear secretly at their girdles: the sign of the greatest sisterhood on earth.

Ann walked back to the Red Grange, fingering this rosary all the way—food—drink—clothes—shelter—



warmth—and her thoughts of service belonged to the absolute realities of life; things not passing, but for all creeds and all time so long as the human race endures. She had, backward and forward, though she was not aware of it, something tremendously firm to hold on to. But she felt herself to be a disillusioned woman as she turned into the drive and saw her beautiful house in which she could never afford to live. She had Stephen and Barbara, a dear inner life—but the outside things, which she was so fitted to enjoy, had gone. She had missed her chance of them.

That evening, sitting over the fire, with the wide house lying silent, she was filled with a sort of vague regret for those dead dreams and ambitions of youth. She and Stephen did not talk much, and the sparse furniture they had brought with them, and which had sufficed for high summer, gave an impression of bleak dreariness now that winter was almost come.

“Sorry to go, Ann?” said Stephen, who had looked at her several times from behind his paper.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said she, starting a little. “The daily round, the common task. Nobody quite likes getting back into harness.”

“Think so?” said Stephen. “Depends——”

But he said no more and went back to his paper, and after a few minutes they went up to bed, holding a single candle which only made the darkness of the hall and the great uncarpeted staircase the more visible.

“When you think,” said Ann in a low voice, pausing at the bend, “of what’s been up and down here; and now just two ordinary little people creeping up to their baby—it’s queer, isn’t it?”

"Queerer if we were not," replied Stephen, yawning. "Come on, Ann, we must begin packing to-morrow."

"We must stay one more Saturday here," said Ann.

"Well, if the weather is fine," said Stephen.

Ann paused at the window of the corridor.

"It is going to be fine," she said, pointing to the clear sky above the yew-trees: and they stood together for a few moments, looking out at the old garden in the moonlight.

"I wish I could keep you here," said Stephen.

"Well, perhaps some day——"

"When Barbara is grown up——" Ann added.

Thus, hoping to make all their dreams come true for their child, as people will, they went to bed.

The weather proved to be glorious, a sort of late Indian summer with orange sunlight on the greenish trunks of the trees and a sparkle in the air, so the last Saturday afternoon at the Red Grange was a most fitting end to a sunny, flowery, summer picnic. Stephen took Barbara to play for the last time in the undulating field beyond the gardens at the back of the house, while Ann went in for half-an-hour to finish packing some spare clothing which had been forgotten, the box containing it having been placed out of the way in an empty room.

Phyllis, the maid, was upstairs making an elaborate coiffure in anticipation of Sunday, and the house was so very still that Ann could hear the autumn wind in the empty rooms and long corridors; in spite of the extraordinary stillness, the whole house was filled with faint sounds.

She entered the room containing the box of spare

clothes, and it felt airless. So she flung open the window. Instantly the different voices of the wind all over the house seemed to shriek together on some high note of terror or anger. The thud of the door as it blew to, was like the heavy close of all this whirl and violence.

Ann knelt on the dusty boards, folding the clothes and thinking of the maid in the next room, who had given her notice that morning. She shook out a summer frock of Barbara's and thought of the worries of servant hunting. The calls on reluctant mistresses—the interviews in dreary registry offices with rather scornful proprietresses who could promise nothing—or facile ones who could do nothing. The likely maids who wanted to go out every night, and the unlikely ones who would make the best of two nights and a Sunday. A trivial unpleasantness, of course, but so is a pea in a shoe, and yet men have been canonized for bearing that gladly. Anyway, it made Ann's earthly pilgrimage during the next month appear a thing to be endured, but not enjoyed: and she felt once again, only more acutely than ever, an almost physical distaste for the dull monotony of the life before her.

After a while she noticed vaguely that the gardeners had been burning some rubbish outside before they left; the acrid odour of charred wood came quite pungently in through the open window.

As she folded the last garment, a puff of smoke actually seemed to fill the room, and she ran across to open the door, feeling angry with the men for having made so large a fire. But the door refused to move, even though she pressed her shoulder firmly against

it, so, after trying several times, she sat down quietly on the box and waited until Stephen and Barbara should come up from the field. She could see them in the far distance now, and it would be easy enough to call to them as they passed under the window. The electric bells were out of order, so it was useless to ring for Phyllis, and the room used as a kitchen was too far away for her voice to reach.

However, so ordinary an occurrence as a door sticking in this great, unused house, which already began to show signs of damp, did not trouble Ann in the least. She sat on the box swinging her feet and wondering how much she would have to pay the new servant.

Then she began to cough a little, and leaned out as far as she could between the mullioned windows, feeling rather angry with the gardeners and still pre-occupied with the servant question.

It was as she leaned out, quite carelessly, that a sudden thin tongue of flame licked round the next casement.

The effect on her, thus unprepared, was extraordinarily startling and horrible. She shouted, pushing her head as far as she could through the narrow window, but her voice fell back, hideously, upon the empty air; only those know how who have screamed into a silence. She cut her hands, dragging at the leaded panes and the immovable window-frame of stone. She flung herself upon the door, bruising her bleeding hands afresh, and it gave a little, yet held fast, as if some one skilled in torture were holding it on the other side.

Then she went back to the window, whence she

could see Stephen and Barbara, a long way off in the field, just a grey and a blue patch, playing together. They were set in the green and gold of the autumn day and framed by the stone mullions as in a picture; and she realized at last that she might never speak to them again.

Smoke filled the room now, and she saw Phyllis running towards the field, and, almost at the same moment, Stephen began to run towards the house.

She was quite alone, then, in the great house which belonged to her.

A sudden horror seized her. She cowered near the door with her fingers to her ears, lest she should hear the terrible sounds which filled the house, like the high crackling of some demoniac laughter.

The smoke belched in through the window so that it was impossible to go near it now, and she crouched, choking, with her mouth to the key-hole. A stupid dullness began to clog her mind; she had odd, random thoughts. Something was troubling her—oh, a servant to find. Was this Mrs. Walker's? She had been fastened in at Mrs. Walker's. She was obliged to take her fingers from her ears and listen to those dreadful sounds—a new sound joined them—a little, little sound—it separated from the rest—grew more distinct.

It was Stephen's footstep in the corridor.

The next thing she heard was a crash of falling masonry, and she found herself lying on the garden grass. It was already twilight, but the red glow from the house illuminated Stephen's pale, begrimed face and a clump of white chrysanthemums near at hand.

The first impression Ann received was one of appalling strangeness. She thought in that first moment that she was dead.

"Barbara!" she managed to whisper hoarsely.

"All right. Gone to the farm, darling. I thought it was best."

"Stephen, I nearly died," she said, still half dazed.

"But I heard your footsteps. I couldn't die when I heard that coming, could I?"

"No, no, dearest. Of course not," said Stephen soothingly, but his eyes were full of tears. The sharpness and sweetness of his love was, in that moment, so keen as to be almost unbearable.

Then came another crash, and the voices of people shouting.

"Can they save the house?" murmured Ann.

"No, I fear not. We are doing our best. Now I must go back. Thank God—"

He bent down and kissed her and she clung to him.

"Oh, Stephen! I thought I was going to leave you."

He said nothing, holding her fast; they had reached the great moment of life for which no words have ever been created because they are not needed.

Then Dr. Grey stepped forward from the shadow of a yew, and Stephen went away again. It still seemed all unreal to Ann, excepting for the one wonderful, clear fact that she was alive in the world with Stephen and Barbara.

"You're not injured in any way," said Dr. Grey quietly. "The fumes choked you, and you have had a great shock, but you will soon be all right again. You have had a narrow escape."

Ann looked up at the red glare and shuddered.

"What caused the fire?" she asked.

"Nobody knows," said Dr. Grey. "It broke out in the maid's room, we believe. But she swears that she hasn't had a light there since last night."

"She may have been curling her hair," said Ann.

"Yes," said Dr. Grey, "I expect that was the case. But we can never prove it. Now you must come to Barbara. She is crying for you."

Ann rose and took Dr. Grey's arm, and they went very slowly towards the farm across the field where Stephen and Barbara had played in the sunshine. When they came to the spot where Ann had seen them playing, she stopped and looked back at the burning house. The window from which she had leaned was gone.

"You think it was the maid?" she said.

"I think so," said Dr. Grey. "But there is no certainty and one does not wish to be unfair to the girl."

"I want to believe she did it," said Ann, looking sideways at him.

It was an odd look which caused him to start almost imperceptibly; then he said in a sharp, matter-of-fact tone—

"Now, Mrs. Finlay, don't get any of that nonsense into your head, please."

"You know what I'm thinking, then?"

"I don't heed all the superstitious nonsense I have heard in Wodenscar," he responded, blustering a little.

"Ah!" said Ann. "Well, I'm safe!"

"Thank God for that," said Dr. Grey solemnly.

“Then you do believe——”

“No! Ridiculous!” said Dr. Grey.

But the part of him which had remained a lad, dreaming and bird’s-nesting in old Wodenscar, still spoke to Ann through that over-emphatic denial.

Then Barbara came toddling out to meet her mother, and called, gurgling at sight of her: “My Mummy wants wassing! My Mummy wants wassing!” Ann seized her almost roughly, in an ecstasy of love and thankfulness.

“My little girl,” she sobbed. “My little, little girl!”

Soon the child lay peacefully asleep under the patchwork quilt of the farmer’s best bed, while Ann sat by the window all night with her bandaged hands before her, looking out at the glare over the burning house.

It flaunted out into the wild sky like a banner, telling all the world that this was the end of the Red Grange—the house which old Courtenay had loved with an intense, jealous passion. Then, towards dawn it was lowered; the fiery glow lay now like a crimson flag upon the ruined pile of smouldering brick and stone. The helpers and watchers began to turn home through the chill wind from the sea, and Stephen went back to the farm. Wodenscar hummed with the beginning of a new day in which there would be no Red Grange and the Courtenays would be forgotten.

But this morning, old men and women in the little houses behind the church crept out to each other, whispering mysteriously, and shaking their heads.

“This Mrs. Finlay—she’s no blood relation to the

Courtenays," wheezed one. "Why did the captain leave it to her?"

"Old sweethearts—so they say. But captain weren't no blood relation neither!"

"Well, what happened to him? And now she's only just got off with her life!"

"Ay, ay," chuckled the eldest of all. "Captain mid leave it to her, and Mrs. Barrington mid leave it to captain—t'old man's bested 'em at finish!"

But they did not tell their tale beyond those narrow limits, because the new, young Wodenscar down by the sea laughs at the old tales and the old people, and the only safeguard against ridicule is secrecy.

CHAPTER XX

THE PURPOSE EMERGING

WHEN Ann went back home through the crisp sparkle of an early autumn morning, and saw the hardy chrysanthemums flowering bravely in the little gardens, and heard the boom of the sea just beyond the terrace end, she felt a sense of joy and courage such as she had never known before.

The row of ordinary houses with their bow-windows took on the indescribable charm of things we have long loved, and found out in the moment of almost losing how much we loved, and have received back again.

On that day when Ann looked through that window at the Red Grange with death close upon her, and saw her husband and child like a picture in the sunshine, she also saw her married life there. And she could never again forget how she then saw it. All her life with those she loved would wear, whatever the troubles and difficulties, some of that indescribable radiance.

But this fine autumn of crisp mornings, and dancing, white-flecked seas, had some part in making such an outlook permanent. You could hardly see Mrs. Walker go by in her new autumn suit and her toque cocked more gaily than ever now that the visitors had departed, without feeling that it was, when all's said and done, a jolly world. Even Mr. Clarke emerged

from making apple chutney on his open fireplace to rejoice because he was at home again.

One evening, towards the end of October, Ann stood at their little gate holding Barbara by the hand and watched her husband come round the corner. It was evident, as he walked down between the little gardens, that the shock of reality had dispersed the brooding shadows left by that terrible misfortune of his youth. He had struggled at last through the darknesses and morbidities of a spoiled young manhood, and he faced the world now, confident, mature.

“ Well, Ann? ”

“ Well, Stephen? ”

“ Hello, Barbara! ”

Then they went in, and husband and wife kissed each other quietly, with a deep tenderness, realizing as they had done at the close of every day since the fire at the Red Grange, the sweetness of their life together.

“ She has just your laugh, ” said Stephen, swinging Barbara high.

“ And did you ever see such arms? ”

“ Yes, and without any joking I do think she has wonderful hair for her age, don't you? ”

Oh, it's a glorious thing to be a young father and mother, to be alone together, and not afraid to openly maintain the splendid truth that their child is, really and truly, the finest in the world. There's a look, a curve, a glint of the hair, a something, somewhere, which the stupid outside world may not perceive, but which sets this little one most gloriously apart.

“ Well, ” said Stephen at last, “ let the maid take her. I want to show you a letter. ”

So Barbara went off, gurgling ambrosially in the servant's arms, and with hearts all warm from her baby kisses the father and mother sat down on the sofa together.

"You remember," said Stephen, "that Margaret thought you should have a change from Wodenscar. She spoke to me very seriously about it."

"Oh, Margaret!" said Ann. "Not but what Margaret is a very sensible person."

"She is that," said Stephen. "Well, anyway, I wrote to old friends in London and I've been offered a good post with a man of large means who requires something rather beyond the usual private secretary. He will give us a good house and garden, and there is plenty of society. It's exactly the thing for us."

"Yes," said Ann, rather mechanically.

"Well!" He took the letter from her. "I did expect you to be more enthusiastic than that, Ann. I really dared not tell you anything about it before, for fear you should be so disappointed if I did not get the post. Aren't you glad? Why, it's a chance in a thousand!"

Ann got up and stood by the fireplace as if she wanted to think without being biassed by any physical contact with her husband.

"Look here," she said. "There's just one question. Do you think that a secretaryship is your job?"

"Of course. Any intelligent man with legal and business training is suitable for such a post."

"But what about the years and energy you've put into the brickyard? There's that to be considered."

"That doesn't matter," said Stephen, looking out of the window.

Ann looked out too, then she said to her husband—
“Come upstairs, Stephen.”

“What for?” he said, but she was already away and he followed her, wondering.

“Look!” She put her arm through his and drew him to the upper window. “See those little new houses over there?”

“Of course,” he said.

“They’re built with your bricks.”

“Oh, yes.”

“And the new barn by that farm on the edge of the town?”

“That too. Well?”

“And the low wall in front of the public-house?”

“Ann!” He turned round to look at her now, half laughing, and puzzled. “What are you driving at?”

“Why! Why!” She pressed close to him, squeezing his arm. “Don’t you see, Stephen? The thing’s begun to move. This town is growing, and new streets will soon spring up everywhere. There’s one half-finished by the terrace end and another by the mill. Your bricks are building them all.”

“Nothing very wonderful——” began Stephen.

“It *is* wonderful!” said Ann. “All beginnings of great things are wonderful. And the Wodenscar Brick Factory is going to be known all over England. The bricks already have a local reputation. You’ll widen it, and have a colony of workers one day on those waste places round the brickyard.”

“But the secretaryship,” protested Stephen.

“Do you think we’re going to give up all that for a secretaryship—a job which is not in your line at all?”

Stephen, how can you?" said Ann, flushed and bright-eyed.

"But that's a certainty of comfort and even luxury. This brick business is a risk," argued Stephen very seriously. "I think it will succeed, but you never can tell, and you would have to stay on in Wodenscar."

"I want to stay in Wodenscar," said Ann. "I never knew how I loved the place until I thought I was leaving it and you for ever, Stephen."

He put his arm round her, and they looked together through the salt spray on the windows which was so faint to-night as to be scarcely perceptible: but it remained enough to make Wodenscar swim before their eyes in a golden haze of sunset, like an enchanted town.

"Then you're not afraid of the future! You want to stay and chance it?"

"I'm not afraid," said Ann.

THE END





